

आधुनिक भारत के निर्माता BUILDERS OF MODERN INDIA आधुनिक
ভারতের স্রষ্টা আধুনিক ভারতের নির্মাতা আধুনিক ভারতনা ধর্মেয়া অধুনিক
ಭಾರತದ ನಿರ್ಮಾಪಕರು આધુનિક ભારતચે શિલ્પકાર આધુનિક ભારતર

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BUILDERS OF MODERN INDIA

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

HIRANMAY BANERJEE

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নব ভারত নিৰ্মাতা

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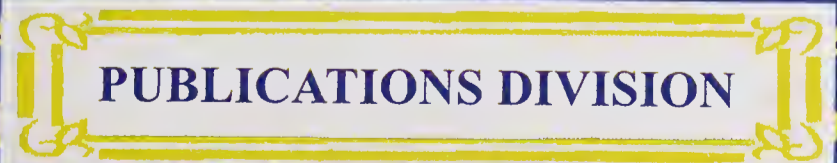
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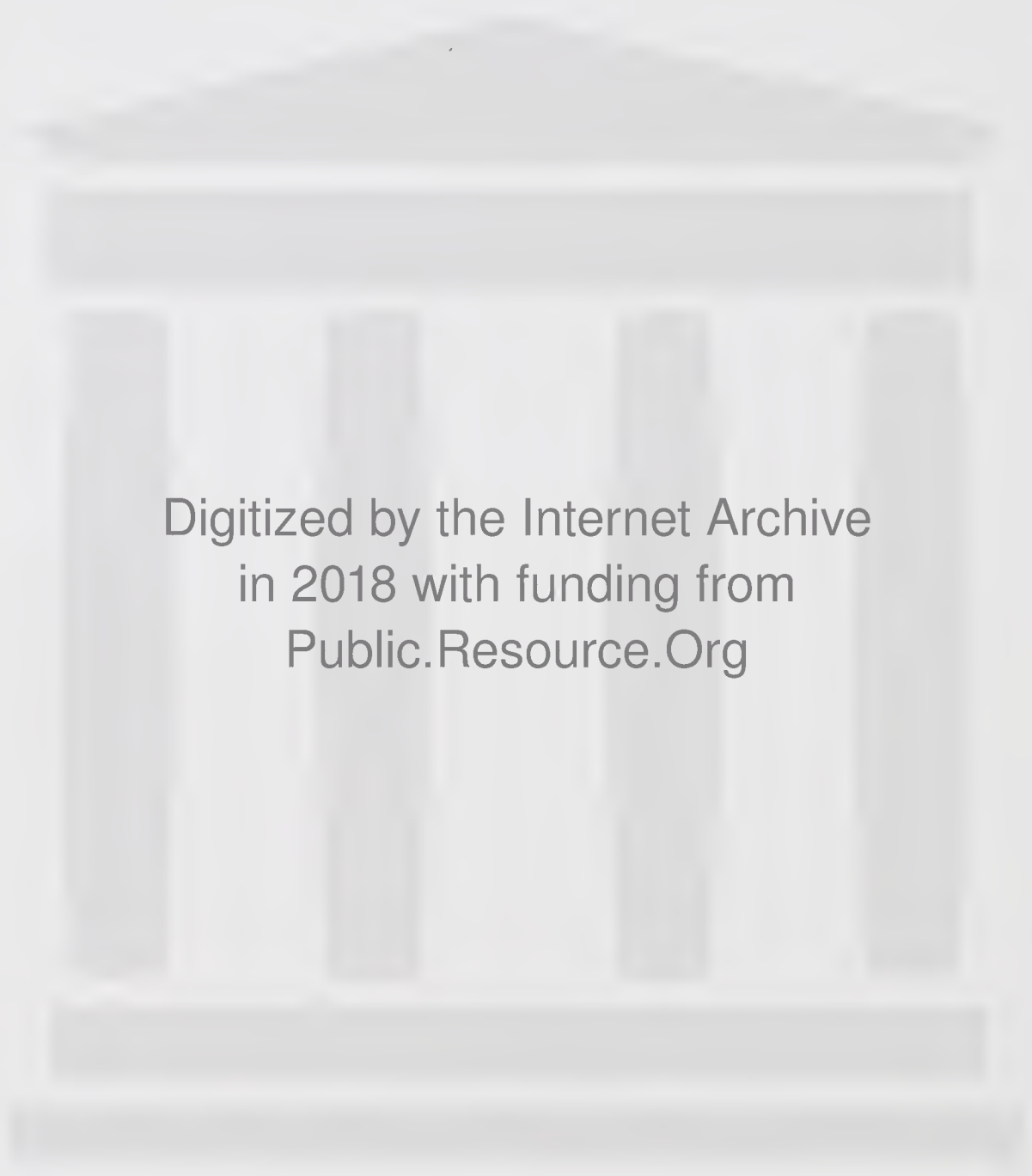
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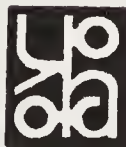


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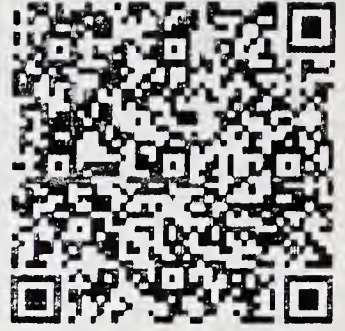
**RABINDRANATH
TAGORE**

Hiranmay Banerjee

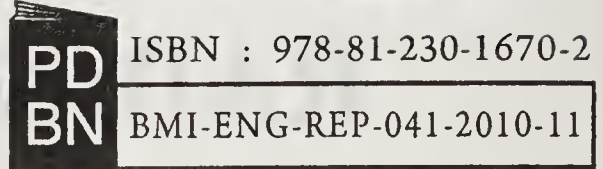


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About The Series

The object of this series is to record, for the present and future generations, the story of the struggles and achievements of the eminent sons and daughters of India who have been mainly instrumental in our national renaissance and the attainment of independence. Except in a few cases, such authoritative biographies have not been available.

The biographies are planned as handy volumes written by knowledgeable people and giving a brief account, in simple words, of the life and activities of the eminent leaders and of their times. They are not intended either to be comprehensive studies or to replace the more elaborate biographies.

Preface

AMONG the builders of modern India, Rabindranath Tagore admittedly enjoys a place of eminence. His numerous contributions again have a distinctive quality of their own. They cover mainly the spiritual and cultural fields but are not confined to them and overflow into other fields as well. His contributions as a creative writer are too well known to be mentioned in detail. In the cultural field, he distinguished himself as an outstanding composer who created a new school of music named after him; as the champion of the traditional dances of India which he revived and in the process built up a new school of dancing; and lastly, as a person who turned in old age a painter who attracted warm appreciation from connoisseurs abroad.

His achievements which extend to other fields are no less remarkable. As an educationist, he introduced new ideas and in carrying out experiments with them, built up a unique educational institution, namely, the Visva Bharati. As a compassionate humanist, he made new experiments in rural reconstruction for the amelioration of the condition of the rural people. In this matter he anticipated the Community Development Programme later initiated by the Planning Commission. Though averse to political activities, Tagore's sensitive mind could not resist reacting to serious political developments in our country. This explains why he involved himself so deeply in the anti-partition movement initiated in Bengal in 1905 and relinquished knighthood after the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in 1919. It was with reference to the anti-partition movement that he introduced the *Rakhibandhan* ceremony and composed a collection of patriotic songs which still continue to sustain and nurture our patriotic feelings.

Tagore's character is thus very complex and has many facets. It is this complexity that makes the task of his biographer somewhat

difficult. An effort has been made in this biographical narrative to cover the different aspects of his character and contributions to our heritage by linking his achievements with the events of his colourful life. It is hoped that the matter presented within the limitations of the present series will be found sufficiently comprehensive and give an adequate idea of the life of this great man.

I consider it a privilege to be invited to make a contribution to this biographical series on a subject which is very dear to my heart.

9th May, 1971

Hiranmay Banerjee

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I

THE ANCESTORS

THE family of the Tagores traces its descent from Bhattanarayan, author of the celebrated Sanskrit drama *Veni Samharam*. There is historical evidence to show that the original home of Bhattanarayan was in Kanauj and it was at the invitation of King Adisur of Bengal that he migrated to the king's court, along with four other distinguished Brahmins, in the eighth century. The king not only rewarded him by the gift of extensive lands but also provided for similar land grants to his sons.

His first son, Adivaraha, settled in the Bandyaghati village, now known as Bandighat, in Birbhum district. His descendants took their family name after this village and came to be known as Bandyopadhyayas. Another son, named Koy, settled in the village Kush, in Burdwan district and his descendants came to be known as Kusharis after the name of the village. There is a controversy as to which of the two branches the Tagore family descended from. One version links it with the Kusharis and the other with the Bandyopadhyayas. The members of the Tagore family claim their descent from Adivaraha and, therefore, say that they originally bore the family name Bandyopadhyaya.*

The movements of the family remained obscure for several centuries afterwards. The story goes, however, that Rabindranath's remote ancestor, Jagannath of Pithabhog village in Jessore district in East Bengal, married a daughter of Sukhdev Ray Choudhury of Chingutia and settled at Narendrapur in the same district.

The next time we hear about them was early in the eighteenth century. Job Charnock had already laid the foundation of Calcutta.

*Rathindranath Tagore, *On the Edges of Time*; also Kshitindranath Tagore, *Dwarkanath Thakurer Jivani*

A port had been opened up near about the place where Fort William stands. It formed part of the village called Govindapur which was one of the three villages bought by Job Charnock for founding Calcutta. The East India Company was plying a brisk trade at this port. The security and facilities for earning a living that this infant town offered started attracting people from outside who settled there and in the process speeded up the pace of its growth.

It was this new growing city that lured Panchanan, who was Jagannath's grandson's grandson, away from his remote village home in Jessore district in search of fortune. It appears that he settled by the bank of the river near the growing port. The area was inhabited by people who eked out a living by fishing or by doing labour for transporting merchandise at the port. Though a lone highcaste Brahmin, living among the common folk, Panchanan, however, did not prove a misfit. His amiable disposition and noble character enabled him not only to live with them peacefully but also to develop ties of affection with them. In fact, his neighbours started loving him as well as respecting him. They started addressing him as 'Thakur'—an appellation which means a 'Godly man'.

Panchanan must have adopted a profession which brought him in close contact with the merchants of the East India Company. The location of his place of living would seem to confirm that. It is presumed that, having heard him called 'Thakur' by his neighbours, the merchants tried to imitate them. But Indian words not unoften undergo strange transformation on European lips. Subjected to the same process, the original Bengali word 'Thakur' became transformed into 'Tagore' and eventually gave his family the surname of 'Tagore'.*

Panchanan left a son named Jayram who became an Amin (Surveyor) under the East India Company. It appears that the family prospered under his care, so that when he died in 1756, he could leave behind a considerable amount of money for his widow and four sons. Of the sons, we shall be directly concerned with the second, called Nilmoni, and the third, Darpanarayan.

*James Farrel, *The Tagore Family*

Soon after, the family became displaced from its home at Govindapur in consequence of some political events. Serajuddaulla, the young Nawab of Murshidabad, assumed a very hostile attitude to the Company, marched to Calcutta in 1756 with an army and overran the city. The fort was then located at the site where the General Post Office now stands. Events moved quickly after that. An army led by Clive marched towards the Nawab's capital at Murshidabad and defeated him utterly at the battle of Plassey. In the struggle for power that followed, Serajuddaulla was murdered and his General Mir Jafar succeeded him as the ruler of Bengal. With peace thus re-established, the East India Company gave serious thought to providing for a more effective defence for Calcutta. The plan for a new fort was drawn up and it was decided that it should be built at Govindapur, that is, at its present site. The site was notified for acquisition and consequently the Tagore family got displaced.

Nilmoni, the head of the family, decided to shift to North Calcutta. Accordingly, he bought a few plots of land close to the river bank at Pathuriaghata and built a new home for the family. His mother gave him money, enough to build a temple and install deities within the compound. After that it appears, the family was left in charge of the third brother, Darpanarayan and Nilmoni left Calcutta in search of fortune elsewhere.

Eventually he found himself a job as the Sheristadar (head clerk) of a collector of the East India Company, whose administrative jurisdiction had then spread over not only Bengal proper but also Orissa and Bihar. There is again a dispute as to where his place of employment was. One version identified it with Chittagong and the other with Cuttack. Without going into details, it may be said that the balance of evidence supports the latter version and it may be assumed safely that his place of employment was Cuttack where he continued to serve the Company for a considerable period of time. It appears that the administrative jurisdiction of East India Company did not extend to Cuttack until after the Second Marhatta War in 1803. Even so, it was not unlikely that Nilmoni had served the Company there with reference to its commercial activities.

In 1784, Nilmoni decided to return to his family house at Pathuriaghata. Darpanarayan had in the meantime become very affluent through business transactions more or less on the lines of banking. It appears that Nilmoni used to send regular remittance from his place of employment during his long absence from home which presumably augmented the resources of his younger brother. On that plea, Nilmoni demanded a share of the profits earned by his brother; the demand, it appears, was rejected.

The story goes that this refusal so strongly reacted on the mind of Nilmoni that he left the family house immediately taking with him only the deities which had been previously installed by him. The distress of this respectable man so touched the heart of a well-to-do neighbour named Vaishnabdas Seth that the latter immediately made over to him as gift a sizeable plot of land in the Jorasanko area, which lies a few furlongs to the south-east of the original home of the Tagores.* That is how the family house of the Tagores at Jorasanko, at present known as premises No. 6 of Dwarkanath Tagore Lane, was founded in about 1784.

It appears that the differences over sharing of profits between the two brothers were subsequently made up through the good offices of mutual friends. Darpanarayan paid one lakh rupees in full satisfaction of all claims of Nilmoni and the matter was treated as closed.**

Nilmoni died in 1791 leaving behind three sons named Ramlochan, Rammani and Ramballabh. Ramlochan and Rammani married two sisters. Ramlochan's wife Alaka Devi had no male child. Rammani's wife Menoka Devi had been blessed with a son who was named Radhanath. A few years later, in 1794, she got a second son who was named Dwarkanath. Now Alaka, the elder sister, expressed a desire that she should be allowed to adopt this second son. The proposal found ready acceptance from her sister and brother-in-law. The fact that they were doubly related and belonged to the same family made this easy. Unfortunately,

*James Farrel, *The Tagore Family*,

**Bhavasindhu Datta, *Maharshi Debendranath Tagore*

however, the cruel hand of death snatched away Menoka Devi from the scene when hardly a year had passed after the birth of this second son, and the ceremony which should have completed the legal adoption could not take place.

The question of legal adoption was reopened five years later in 1799. The father had no reason to object. So the ceremony was gone through and Dwarkanath attained legally the status of his uncle Ramlochan's son. But even before this legal ceremony was gone through, the aunt Alaka Devi had by her own merits earned the right to step into the shoes of the natural mother. She took charge of the child when he was still an infant in arms and brought him up with all the care and attention that could have been showered by the real mother.

When Ramlochan died in 1807, Dwarkanath had just stepped into his teens.

Dwarkanath was destined to play a great part not only in the history of his family but also of the country as well. In fact, he was one of the first few leading figures that came under the impact of Western culture. The other great figure was Rammohun Roy. Although separated by a difference of age of more than twenty years, they found themselves drawn close together by natural affinities of character. Both were endowed with strong personalities, both entertained a progressive and liberal outlook and both were staunch nationalists at heart. No wonder, we find Dwarkanath playing the part of a junior partner of Rammohun in their joint efforts to ameliorate the condition of their country.

It appears that Dwarkanath had taken a decision at an early age on his own initiative to establish close contact with the British people. Imbued with progressive ideas, he did not fail to appreciate that the new culture represented by them had qualities which could regenerate his own people. His admiration naturally drew him towards them and he decided to master their language thoroughly so that he could establish close contact with them. In this matter, he followed the example of Rammohun Roy who entertained similar views and who at considerable pains mastered the English language, himself. So, after taking courses in Arabic and Persian,

as was the practice in those days, he seriously set himself to the task of mastering English. Sherbourne's school was located at Jorasanko and he got himself admitted to it. After completing the courses there, he took lessons from private tutors like J. S. Gordon and James Calder. To brush up his knowledge of English further, he also took lessons from William Adams of the Baptist Mission, who was a close friend of Rammohun.

After attaining mastery over the English language, he took his first appointment as the Sheristadar of the Collector of Twenty four Parganas. The competence with which he discharged his duties so impressed his superior officers that they decided to give him a quick lift to provide him a wider scope for the exercise of his talents. So in 1829, he was elevated to the position of the Dewan of the Salt Board. His drive, efficiency and integrity soon earned him another prompt promotion. He was appointed Dewan of the Custom, Salt and Opium Board the same year.

For a man of his capacity and ambition, however, the trammels of office did not give him enough freedom for the exercise of his talents. He had proved his efficiency as an administrator but he had little opportunity so far to try his skill in business and commercial enterprises, which obviously was one of the great ambitions of his life. With the rapid expansion of trade as a direct consequence of the industrial revolution, an expanding demand for banking facilities had grown up in Calcutta. To cater to this need, the Bengal Bank was established in Calcutta in 1806. But there was still scope for banking business in the field. And so in 1829, when he was still in service, Dwarkanath founded his own bank called the Union Bank, with a capital of Rupees fourteen lakhs. It was so efficiently managed that by 1839, its working capital had increased to over Rupees one crore.

While in service, he had also interested himself in an issue which had a direct bearing on the interests of the East India Company. Under a Charter granted by the British Parliament, which had to be renewed every twenty years, the East India Company had enjoyed a monopoly of trade with India. In the meantime, a growing community of independent traders had

appeared in the field as their competitors and clamoured for the abolition of the Company's monopoly rights. As a consequence, in the renewed Charter of 1813, its monopoly rights were taken away. As the time for another renewal of the Charter came nearer, the agitation for total abolition of the Company's trading rights gathered momentum. In about 1829, it had intensified so much that a fierce controversy was raging both in England and in Calcutta over this issue.

We find that Dwarkanath had become actively involved in it. He held the view that there should be free trade and the Company's trading rights should be abolished. On December 15, 1829, a public meeting was called in the Town Hall of Calcutta to discuss this issue where he moved a resolution demanding abolition of the Company's trading rights. The British Government yielded to the pressure of public opinion and in 1833, terminated the Company's trading rights by refusing to renew the Charter.

This was the time for Dwarkanath to try his luck in the field of trade and business. He did not hesitate to take advantage of the opportunity and submitted his resignation of the Dewani of the Board of Custom, Salt and Opium on August 1, 1834. The Board accepted it in the spirit in which it had been given, fully realising that Dwarkanath's talents would find better scope for their application outside the government. The letter of acceptance written by the Board's Secretary, Henry Meredith Parker, not only contained passages giving expression to these sentiments but also contained appreciation of Dwarkanath's qualities. The relevant portion is quoted below:

“As the high sense which the Board entertain of your qualification and integrity and of their appreciation of the advantage which the public interests have derived from your connection with this office are recorded in the proceedings of the Board, it would be superfluous to say more at present than that your past services have met with the cordial approbation of the Board.”

This was followed by a personal letter from the same officer, who had developed a strong affection for him, in which his

appreciation of the many qualities of Dwarkanath was more eloquently expressed. "My dear Dwarkanath," it says, "Continue to set an example to your countrymen of honour and integrity, continue through good report and ill report to hold fast by truth and cultivate the approbation of your conscience, continue to lead in the path of true knowledge and intellectual civilisation."

Dwarkanath started this new chapter of life with his usual drive and imagination. He took William Carr, a British merchant, as his partner and started a firm under the title of Carr, Tagore and Co. It thrived beyond expectation under his care and established branches all over Bengal. It interested itself in all possible items of enterprise which included dealings in indigo, sugar as well as management of landed properties. His boldness and imagination brought for this firm other distinctions as well. He opened some pioneering ventures which put to use for the first time on our soil the technology developed in the West. In 1837, he opened a business for towing boats carrying merchandise with the help of steam-powered tugs. For supply of coal to these tugs, he started the Bengal Coal Company in the Ranigunj area for coal mining, again a new venture, the first of its kind in India. For the repair of these tugs, he opened a dock at Kidderpore which offered facilities for repair of ships.

The Carr, Tagore and Company was run with such skill and efficiency that it soon established its reputation as one of the foremost firms in Calcutta. It earned vast profits and Dwarkanath became a very rich man. If he knew how to earn money, Dwarkanath also knew how to spend it. Gifted with a compassionate heart and a keen appetite for enjoyment, he spent his money as liberally as a prince. While a great part of his expenditure was on account of charities, a considerable amount used to be diverted to social functions. Believing in intimate social intercourse with the European community, he used to arrange grand parties in royal style. For this purpose he built a small garden house in Belgachia. The parties he gave there to his European friends attracted the elite of that community including high ranking officials and even close relations of the Governor. The parties came to be recognised as

among the principal social events of Calcutta and would make headline news in the morning papers of those days.

It may be of interest to quote one of such reports, which gives a fine account of Dwarkanath in his role as a host. *Calcutta Courier* dated February 26, 1841 gives the following account of Dwarkanath's party:

“The assembly at Dwarkanath Tagore's last night was surpassingly brilliant. It was attended by the Hon'ble Miss Eden, Sir E. Ryon and the majority of other leaders of Calcutta society. The house (which had been tastefully decorated) and the grounds were brilliantly illuminated: the fireworks were superior to any we ever saw before in India; the host himself was as usual, courteous and sedulous for the comfort of all; and that the guests enjoyed themselves is testified by the lateness of the hour to which they lingered.”

No wonder, the grand style in which he lived and his bountiful charity earned him the epithet Prince. He became a prince by popular assent. But that is the least part of his greatness. His progressive ideas and his keen love of freedom and largeness of heart earned him something more than that. He won their respect and love, and became the object of affection to both the Indian and European communities alike.

Dwarkanath's progressive outlook naturally attracted him to movements which were conducive to the welfare of his country. In this matter, he followed the example of his senior contemporary, Rammohun Roy, and willingly lent his support as his worthy lieutenant. These activities started from his early life and continued even after the death of Rammohun. Both had educated themselves in English and after acquiring a mastery over it, tasted the virtue of the new learning based on scientific outlook. Both realised that it carried ideas which should be transmitted to the minds of our own people so that they could reawaken and rediscover themselves. But this could not be done unless facilities for English education were provided on a large scale to the youth of the country. The then Government of the country, however, was reluctant to do so. So they decided that the initiative had to come from the people.

That is how the movement for English education started in Bengal in the second decade of the nineteenth century. Rammohun, who had by then settled in Calcutta, gave the lead. But the brunt of the work fell on the shoulders of a Scotsman named David Hare. He came to India as a merchant dealing in clocks, but having a generous heart, he fell in love with its people and devoted himself to their service. He decided to champion the cause taken up by Rammohun. Accordingly, appeals were issued for raising subscription. The response was quite generous. Dwarkanath himself contributed ten thousand rupees. With these funds, a piece of land was acquired at College Square and the Hindu College was opened there on January 20, 1817. Its objective was stated to be to open “the main channel by which real knowledge may be transferred from the European sources to the intellect of Hindustan”.

Dwarkanath was interested not only in the spread of English education but also of knowledge of applied science, particularly in the field of medicine. He, therefore, hailed the decision of Lord William Bentinck to open a medical college in Calcutta in 1835 for training Indians in medical treatment under Western methods. To attract meritorious students to the College, he donated two thousand rupees for awarding prizes to them. His first visit to the United Kingdom convinced him so strongly of the merits of the Western method of treatment, that he decided that Indian doctors should be given facilities for higher training in medicine in the United Kingdom. At his initiative, the Government was persuaded to offer two scholarships to Indian medical graduates for training abroad. To supplement these efforts, he selected two more graduates himself and bore the entire expense of their training in England from his own funds.

Dwarkanath also worked in close collaboration with Rammohun Roy in another field. The rite of *suttee* under which Hindu widows used to be allowed to immolate themselves on the funeral pyre of their deceased husbands, had gained unusual popularity at the turn of the century due to the operation of some extraneous factors. Excessive greed of prospective successors-in-interest to the husband's property would not unoften overcome their scruples

of conscience and make them adopt the role of constructive murderers. Taking advantage of the shock of grief of the widows, they would encourage them to turn *suttees* and persuade them to take their seats on the funeral pyre. Once this was done, they saw to it that they were forcibly burnt to death. It thus grew into a very barbarous custom.

It is not that the heinous character of this practice escaped the notice of the then Government. Their sense of justice revolted against this and they gave expression to their protest as early as 1812 by passing regulations prescribing police intervention against forcible burning of widows. But that proved hardly effective. Things came to a head when Rammohun took up the cause of these unfortunate women and started an agitation in 1817 for the abolition of this rite. In fact, he submitted a representation to the then Governor-General Lord Hastings, in which he brought to his notice its ugly features. This provoked a counter-agitation led by the orthodox section. In this situation, the Company decided to continue its old policy.

Rammohun, however, did not give up the cause. During Lord Amherst's time, he reopened the issue. What was preventing the Government from giving effect to his wishes was a misgiving that the right was sacramental in character and official measures would be construed as interference with religious practices by the alien power. Rammohun's approach, therefore, was different. He tried to convince Lord Amherst that the rite did not enjoy the sanction of the Shastras, as was the fact. But the latter still hesitated, though he was convinced about the soundness of Rammohun's arguments. Lord Amherst's feelings are very frankly expressed in the following comment made by him in 1828:

“I must frankly confess, though at the risk of being considered insensible to the enormity of the evil, that I am inclined to recommend our trusting to the progress now making in the diffusion of knowledge among the natives for the gradual suppression of this detestable superstition*.”

*James Farrel, *The Tagore Family*

Events however took a quick turn when Lord William Bentinck took over the Governor-Generalship. His receptive mind and sympathetic heart enabled him to appreciate the soundness of the point made by Rammohun. He did not, therefore, hesitate to abolish the rite by declaring it illegal and punishable under law by passing Regulation XVII on December 4, 1829. That in doing so he was very much influenced by Rammohun's observation that it could be easily suppressed by police intervention, as it was a rite based more on custom than religious sanction, is confirmed by Lord Bentinck in his despatch dated November 8, 1829.

The fact that Dwarkanath lent Rammohun a helping hand in persuading the Governor-General to abolish the rite has not gained much currency. There is, however, reliable evidence to prove this. His eminent position as a leading figure respected by the European community and enjoying easy access to the head of the state made this possible for him. Sharing Rammohun's progressive ideas, he also emphasised the fact that the rite did not enjoy the blessings of the Shastras. The following quotation from the letter of Lady Bentinck addressed to Dwarkanath will bear this out :

“I have much pleasure in stating that among the native community of Calcutta, the late Rammohun Roy and yourself were the persons who took the warmest interest and afforded the most important information tending to show that, although by long established custom, the awful rite had obtained the effect of law, still it was a ceremony not really inculcated by the Shastras of the Hindus.”*

Dwarkanath's love of freedom of speech dragged him into another controversy in which also he scored resounding success. By the turn of the century, the Press had established itself as an effective institution in Calcutta. Unfortunately, some journalists were in the habit of indulging in vilification of persons holding high places in society. This compelled the Government to adopt measures for the censorship of the Press as early as 1799. This started a controversy in which one party pleaded for censorship

*Kshitindranath Tagore, *Dwarkanath Thakurer Jivani*

while the other wanted its withdrawal. The tussle between the parties continued for decades, their fortunes fluctuating from time to time. Thus while the measures for control of the Press were intensified in 1813, Lord Hastings withdrew them altogether in 1817. In 1823, however, they were reintroduced and the new regulation prescribed among other things that no new journal could be brought out without a licence.

In 1835, the agitation for the withdrawal of Press censorship was intensified. This time, both the European and the Indian communities joined hands in pleading for withdrawal of the control. As a part of this agitation, a public meeting was held in the Town Hall of Calcutta where a resolution was passed recommending its withdrawal. Dwarkanath endeared himself to both the Indian and European communities by taking an active part in this movement. The efforts met with unexpected success as the then Governor General, Sir Charles Metcalf withdrew all Press restrictions. For celebrating this success, a dinner party was arranged on February 9, 1838, in which Henry Meredith Parker moved a toast in honour of Dwarkanath in recognition of the services rendered by him for 'that cause whose triumph they had met that night to celebrate'.*

After meeting with unprecedented success in all matters in which he interested himself, Dwarkanath naturally concerned himself about the future of the commercial firms he had established. Both the Union Bank, started in 1829, and the Carr, Tagore and Company, established in 1834, enjoyed continued prosperity under his personal care. Being the architect of these two firms, he was naturally anxious about their future security.

He thought that the best way to provide for it was to get his eldest son Debendranath interested in their affairs and to train him up for the future role of administrative head of both these firms. The hopes were, however, belied. By inclination, Debendranath was a very pious man and had little interest in running banks or commercial houses. His lack of interest in business made Dwarkanath anticipate that the future of the firms established by him was

*Kshitindranath Tagore, *Dwarkanath Thakurer Jivani*

uncertain and if the worst happened, his family might have to face a financial crisis.

In his judgment, the best thing that he could do under the circumstances was to set apart some property which could assure a steady income to the family in case of financial distress. This took the form of a trust deed comprising four Zamindari estates situated in North Bengal and Cuttack in Orissa which were to be administered by a body of three trustees who were his close relations. The sons were debarred from holding direct connection with the properties but were entitled to share its profits. The deed was executed in August 1840.

It appears that about this time, Dwarkanath was feeling an urge to withdraw himself from his busy life in Calcutta. Many factors might have contributed to this feeling. For one thing, his beloved mother Alaka Devi died in 1838 during his absence from home on a tour in North India. This was followed by the untimely death of his wife Digambari Devi, in January, 1839. This must have proved a great shock to him. The fact that his eldest son did not shape the way he wanted him to do must have been another factor. All this presumably worked together to engender in him a wish to leave, at least for a short time, the scene of his activities. Thus we find him planning for a visit to the United Kingdom.

The journey materialised on January 9, 1842, when he left for the United Kingdom accompanied by his nephew Chandramohan Chatterjee. After visiting different parts of the United Kingdom including Wales and Scotland and building a mausoleum on the tomb of his beloved friend Rammohun at Bristol, he returned home in January next year.

It appears that he also spent some time in Paris and was given a reception by Emperor Louis Phillipe which he reciprocated with equal pomp.* What is remarkable about this visit is the spontaneous warm welcome he received everywhere during his sojourn in Europe, particularly in the United Kingdom.

*Kshitindranath Tagore, *Dwarkanath Thakurer Jivani*

In London, apart from the reception given by the Queen herself, the Lord Mayor gave in his honour a banquet at the Mansion House. In proposing the toast for him the Lord Mayor observed: "The high character and great attainments of my friend on my right render him an ornament to society. The great kindness he has always shown to our countrymen in India entitled him to the gratitude of every British subject."*

Similarly, when he visited Edinburgh, he was given an equally warm welcome. In a ceremony fitting the occasion, the Lord Provost and other office-bearers of the city admitted him to the position of a burgess and guild brother of the city in appreciation of his character. This was a rare distinction even for a citizen of the United Kingdom, not to speak of "a native merchant of their Indian Empire". No wonder it made headline news in the local paper. The *Scotsman* observed: "The Council Chamber of Edinburgh yesterday witnessed an event unprecedented in the annals of Great Britain, the presentation of the freedom of the city to a Hindoo gentleman."

What they saw in Dwarkanath as a representative of the Indian people so charmed the hearts of the people of Great Britain that they pleaded for the conferment of some distinction on him by the Government before his return to India. This feeling was voiced in an editorial of the *Bengal Herald* of London very eloquently. Relevant extracts from the same are given below:

"We cannot believe that such a man as Dwarkanath Tagore will be suffered to leave our shores undistinguished by some marks which shall demonstrate to his countrymen the estimation in which his rare virtues are held by the present administration."**

After returning to Calcutta in 1843, Dwarkanath settled down to his own routine. It appears, however, that he could not set his mind to his work. Within a couple of years, he decided to pay a second visit to the United Kingdom. Evidently, he was in a mood to retire from public life and had decided to spend an indefinite period of time outside the country.

* Satyendranath Tagore, *Amar Balya Katha*

** Ibid

So we find him leaving India the second time on March 8, 1845, for Great Britain. This time he was accompanied by his youngest son Nagendranath. He settled for a long stay in a country house in Surrey. But he fell victim to a fatal disease next year which terminated his life on August 1, 1846, far away from home at comparatively early age of 52 years.

So ended a colourful life which found expression in a broad field and distinguished itself in many ways. His fine qualities of head and heart had endeared him to the people of Calcutta and the void he left could not evidently be filled up. While his example must have fired the imagination of his grandson Rabindranath, his foresight saved the family from utter ruin when it was overcome by financial disaster soon after his death. The trust deed he had created for the maintenance of the family gave his progeny enough financial security to be able to live in comfort without being extravagant and thus indirectly helped to create the atmosphere of culture in the family which was built up in succeeding generations.

II

THE FAMILY

DWARKANATH LEFT behind three sons named Debendranath, Girindranath and Nagendranath, born in that order. Of them, the two younger brothers died very young. The youngest, Nagendranath, left no issue. The second brother, Girindranath, left two sons named Ganendranath and Gunendranath. Unfortunately, like their father, they also died very young. The elder of these left no issue but Gunendranath was blessed with three sons, of whom Abanindranath, who attained distinction in later life as the founder of the Bengal School of Art, was the youngest. By his will, Dwarkanath had partitioned his Calcutta property at Dwarkanath Tagore Lane between his first two sons. It consisted of two buildings—the big sprawling ancestral house at present known as Maharshi Bhavan, and the house he had built himself to its southwest which came to be known as Baitakkhana Bari. The elder brother Debendranath got the ancestral house and Girindranath was given the house built by Dwarkanath himself. This house has since been demolished. The Rabindra Bharati University has acquired the ancestral house named after Debendranath and converted it into a museum.

Debendranath was born on May 15, 1817, which by a strange coincidence is the year in which the Hindu College was also founded throwing open for the first time opportunities for English education to the young men of Bengal. In early life, he received his education partly in the school opened by Rammohun Roy in North Calcutta for imparting English education to Bengalis and partly in the Hindu College. In 1834, when he was still in his teens, his father Dwarkanath withdrew him from the Hindu College and gave him an appointment as apprentice in his own bank.

Debendranath was, however, born with an innate urge for a life of piety and devotion. Strangely enough, this urge remained dormant

altogether during his boyhood when he showed every sign of enjoying the life of luxury and comfort that his father's vast wealth had provided him. It was the impact of a shock, the first of its kind received by him in life, that dramatically awakened his innate urge. In 1838, during his father's absence from home his grandmother Alaka Devi fell seriously ill. Despairing of her life and anticipating that death was imminent, her attending physician advised her removal to the bank of the river Bhagirathi in conformity with the convention obtaining in those days that was the most desirable way of departing from life on earth. However, the physician's anticipation proved inaccurate; the pious lady actually expired three days later, establishing that the removal had been badly timed. This compelled Debendranath, who was very strongly attached to his grandmother, to stay on with her on the river bank till death overtook her. During the night preceding her death, Debendranath experienced a strong urge for renunciation and the impact it produced altogether transformed his life.

Henceforth, he was not the light-hearted son of a wealthy father given to frivolous pleasure; he turned a man of piety looking for the God of his heart to give solace and a sense of security to his mind. Providence gave him the answer to this problem. One morning he happened to catch hold of a torn page of a book floating in the air, which on scrutiny was found to contain the very first sentence of the *Ishopanishad* which reads: "Whatever there is in the Universe is pervaded by God; enjoy life with restraint; do not steal another's property." That provided him with the clue for the solution of his problem. His pious heart found comfort in conceiving God in a monotheistic form. He thought God was too great and too pure to be conceived as an incarnation in the form of a man, even less so in the form of a deity.

It appears that in this matter he was profoundly influenced by Rammohun with whom he came in close contact both as a friend of his father and as his own teacher. This inevitably involves us in a digression about the religious movement which was raging over the country at the time as a result of the impact of Western culture. In the field of religion, the Bengali Hindus or, for that

matter Hindus anywhere in India, have been used to a distinct religious practice in which God is worshipped in an incarnate form as represented by a deity. The Englishmen of those days, who found themselves established in the position of the rulers of our country and were used, on the other hand, to the Christian form of religion, denounced this as idolatry. The glamour of their culture, which could claim notable achievements in the field of technology, carried more weight with the Bengalis of those days educated in the Hindu College than the scriptures of their own decaying culture. Many of them were disenchanted with Hinduism and adopted Christianity. Rammohun also shared their feelings but his nationalistic outlook helped him to find a solution to the problem through other methods. For people adopting his way of thinking, he introduced a disincarnate form of worship, basing it on the texts of the *Brahma Sutras*. In the process, he became the founder of an institution which offered opportunity for worship in disincarnate form for those who preferred it and named it the Atmiya Sabha. That was in 1815. Afterwards he felt the need for organising the group that had gathered round him into a community; he named it the Brahmo Samaj and also provided for it a church in a hired house in Jorasanko area in North Calcutta in 1828. Before he left for the United Kingdom, he had built a church for the Samaj at 55/1, Chitpore Road. After his death at Bristol in 1833, the new community lingered on without effective leadership.

It appears that Debendranath was destined to step into the vacuum created by Rammohun's death. Like Rammohun, he also founded the Tattvabodhini Sabha to practise worship in disincarnate form. When the Brahmo Samaj was founded, he was only a boy of twelve. When he grew up, by natural inclination he found himself drawn to the Brahmo Samaj and its affairs. In 1843, he paid a visit to it and finding that it practised principles similar to his own, he decided to take over its charge and disbanded his own Sabha.

He also started a journal named *Tattvabodhini Patrika* in 1843, for the purpose of carrying on publicity for the Samaj. Though meant primarily to serve the cause of this infant community, it

grew to be the leading cultural organ of his days, thanks to his foresight and imagination.

Under his able leadership, the new community prospered again. Soon, he decided to give this new religious practice the status of an established religion and so, under his direction, the Brahmo Samaj was converted into the Brahmo Dharma. He got himself initiated into this new religion along with twenty followers on 7th Pausa, 1250, Bengali Sambat, corresponding to December 23, 1843. Ever since, this day has been observed as one of the sacred days of the community.

His innate piety at last found scope for suitable expression. He gradually drew away from worldly affairs and devoted all his energy to the service of this adopted religion. He worked with such vigour that by 1858, he had not only been able to establish its branches all over Bengal but even at distant Bareilly in Uttar Pradesh.

While the religion of his adoption prospered under his attention, the business establishments of the family withered for want of care. So long as his father Dwarkanath lived, it did not matter, but with his death, this neglect produced a serious adverse effect on them. The Union Bank collapsed in 1847, within a year of his father's death. The liquidation of the Carr, Tagore and Company next year produced more serious consequences. It being a partnership firm, all the family assets became liable to seizure in the liquidation of the company and the satisfaction of the debts of its creditors which amounted to a considerable sum.

The family was confronted with serious financial calamity. Debendranath showed exemplary moral courage by facing it with stoic fortitude. The misfortune also proved to be an occasion to bring into display his high moral qualities. In consequence of this financial shipwreck, utter poverty would have stared him in the face but for the foresight of his father who had created a trust deed covering some rent-paying estates which could not be touched by the liquidators. Debendranath would not, however, take advantage of this position. On the contrary, he volunteered to offer the income of these estates towards the liquidation of the family debts.

The creditors reacted favourably to this noble gesture and an understanding was reached that out of the income of these landed properties, the family would be paid an allowance of Rs. 25,000 annually and the balance would be diverted towards the liquidation of debts. Under Debendranath's inspiration, the family went through this ordeal cheerfully. All items of luxury were sold away and, by practising extreme thrift, it was possible to pay off all debts within about ten years from the date the firm went into liquidation. After that, the entire income of these landed properties became available to the family which enabled it to live comfortably without being affluent.

Debendranath's active interest in the Brahmo Samaj continued vigorously for several more years. In this matter, he was actively helped by one of the most brilliant young men of those days in the person of Keshab Chandra Sen. Scion of a distinguished family of Calcutta, he charmed the heart of Debendranath by his penetrating intellect and power of oration. His progressive outlook and passion for religious reform made it easy for the elderly leader to recruit him as a worker for the cause of the new religion. Discovering in him an able lieutenant, Debendranath did not hesitate to elevate him to the position of Acharya (Preceptor) of the Brahmo Samaj in 1862 and conferred on him the title of Brahmananda. Under their joint leadership, the affairs of the Samaj prospered very well.

Unfortunately, seeds of disruption marred their work a few years after and as a consequence, the leaders of the Samaj drifted apart. Extreme ideas germinated in the minds of the younger section of the community which entertained different views from Debendranath about the lines along which the new religion should develop. The younger section wanted to take extreme steps which would in effect create a rift between the Samaj and the bigger Hindu community. Debendranath, however, was keen to retain the national character of his religion and, therefore, could never agree to sever the ties with the Hindus. His idea was to remain within the folds of Hinduism and simultaneously transmit to it the progressive ideas of this new faith. This will be confirmed by the

observation he made in a reply given at a reception organised by his admirers: “My mission is to reform and improve the Hindu community of Hindusthan to which I am deeply attached by ties of affection, through (intimate contact) with the holy Brahmo religion.”

He, therefore, pleaded for a path of restraint. But the younger section led by Kesab Chandra was too impatient to listen to his words of caution. This created tension between the two leaders which intensified so much that ultimately Kesab Chandra took the extreme step of breaking away from the parent group and founding a new community which he named the Bharatbarshiya Brahmo Mandir. He built a separate church for it in 1866. Debendranath continued to be the leader of the old group which henceforth came to be known as the Adi Brahmo Samaj to distinguish it from the new community.

If Debendranath’s first concern was the promotion of the cause of Brahmoism founded by Rammohun, he did not lack in love for the parent Hindu religion. He considered it his duty to protect the Hindu community against attacks from outsiders. If occasion demanded it, he would not hesitate even to assume leadership of the Hindus. The questionable methods adopted by a Christian missionary, Alexander Duff, to secure recruits from Hindus provided one such occasion. He had persuaded a student of his school, named Umesh Chandra Sarkar, still in his teens, to adopt Christianity. As Sarkar happened to be married to a still younger wife, Duff conceived the idea of converting them together and the young girl was kidnapped while she was travelling. When the news reached the ears of Debendranath, he became furious and started a relentless campaign on behalf of the Hindu community to prevent adoption of such unclean tactics. A public meeting was called at his initiative to build up public opinion against the missionaries and a campaign was started to boycott missionary schools.

After his estrangement with Keshab Chandra, for whom evidently he entertained deep affection, Debendranath lost his enthusiasm for activities to promote the interest of his church. He

started spending his time in meditation in the Himalayas and adopted the life of a recluse. It was his quest for secluded spots for meditation that led him to discover the famous nook at Bolpur where he founded Santiniketan which became famous in later times by association with his son Rabindranath. He would rarely return home unless the occasion absolutely demanded it. On one such occasion, he took his youngest son Rabindranath with him to the Himalayas and actually spent three months with him at Bakrota near Dalhousie. This short but close association produced far-reaching effects on the impressionable mind of young Rabindranath. We shall have occasion to deal with this in detail at the proper stage.

After this, with the advancing age working against him, Debendranath's health deteriorated and, under medical advice, he was compelled to give up residence at a high altitude in the hills of the Himalayas. Even so, he would not return home.

It was not until he heard an inner call that he decided in 1898 to return to his ancestral house to prepare himself for death which he felt was near at hand. He occupied his favourite suite of rooms in the second floor of his house. He passed his days there exclusively in meditation and religious discourses, attended only by his personal secretary Priyanath Sastri and his widowed eldest daughter Saudamini Devi to look after his personal needs. He died in January 1905.

Debendranath was the seat of many opposite virtues, as we have already noticed. His detachment from household affairs did not prevent him from paying the necessary attention to his estate and, through indirect supervision, he managed to maintain an efficient administration. He was very methodical in his habits and had a happy sense of balance. While assuring for the members of his family comfortable living and proper education, he would not provide any scope for luxury for them. On the contrary, he would ungrudgingly extend all necessary financial assistance for cultural pursuits or activities which served the national interest. It was this sense of balance as reflected in his treatment of the dependent members of his family that enabled them to build up a unique

atmosphere in their home in which all good things of life were avidly cultivated. Unlike ordinary children of wealthy families who wasted their money and time in base sensual pleasures, the sons, daughters and daughters-in-law of Debendranath engaged themselves exclusively in cultural and allied pursuits.

His children loved and respected him with utmost devotion and fully appreciated the beneficial effects flowing from this attitude of their father., Their appreciation is very nicely reflected in the following words of Rabindranath:

“In this manner, though brought up in an atmosphere of wealth and affluence, he protected us from the stain of pomp and sensuality and if, in the process, the door of the golden cage of wealth was kept open for them to some extent, enabling them thereby to establish their right to fly in the open sky of spiritual attainment, then admittedly they have proved to be more fortunate than people who were much more well off than they, by virtue of their father’s wise action.”*

No wonder he was held in utmost veneration by people who came in contact with him. His numerous qualities could not fail to attract the admiration of his contemporaries who fittingly gave him the appellation of Maharshi which means the master saint.

Debendranath was blessed with a numerous family. As many as nine sons and six daughters were born to him. Of them, one daughter and two sons died very young; the daughter happened to be the eldest; and of the two sons, one happened to be the youngest child born to him. But for convenience of treatment, we refer to the second daughter, Saudamini Devi, as the first daughter and Rabindranath, who was the fourteenth child and the eighth son, as the youngest child of the family. Of others who lived to attain adulthood, we shall restrict ourselves to only those who took an active part in building up an atmosphere of culture in the family.

The family of Debendranath’s second brother also lived in a separate building in the same compound and shared the profits of

*Rabindranath Tagore, *Charitra Puja*

the family estates. Though the two branches occupied different houses, they lived so intimately that the children of the two brothers behaved more or less like the members of one and the same family. The two sons of Girindranath, named Ganendranath and Gunendranath, therefore, also fall into the group that built up the unique atmosphere of culture. Of them, in point of age, Girindranath's eldest son Ganendranath was senior to Satyendranath, the second son of Debendranath, but younger to Dwijendranath, his eldest son. So while Dwijendranath enjoyed the privileged position of being the eldest brother or *Barda* by seniority of age, Ganenranath appropriated the position of the second brother or *Mejda*. That is another evidence of the close intimacy that grew up between the two branches.

Luckily, Dwijendranath (1840-1926) was endowed with all the virtues that were necessary to equip him for playing the role of the eldest brother of the family. Inheriting his father's indifference to worldly possessions, he lived a very simple life. Although literary pursuit was his compelling passion, he had an inventive turn of mind which attracted him to diverse hobbies. Sharing common interests, he developed an intimacy with poet Beharilal Chakravarty who would pay frequent visits to this house. Both distinguished themselves as leading poets of those days and between themselves created a literary atmosphere in the house. This roused the interest of other members of the family in literary pursuits and in the ripeness of time helped Rabindranath to develop his own poetic talents.

In collaboration with his fourth brother, Jyotirindranath, he also started a literary magazine named *Bharati* in 1877 and himself became its first editor. It distinguished itself as one of the leading literary journals in Bengali of those days and continued to hold its position more or less throughout its long career until it was wound up in 1925. The availability of a magazine for publication of their writings is a powerful incentive for budding writers. It provided Rabindranath with the first opportunity of contributing to a magazine with a reputation. Thus his experiences in the United Kingdom during his first sojourn in 1878 and the following

years were published in this magazine under the title *Europe Prabasiṛ Patra*.

The second brother in the family, Ganendranath (1841-69), was snatched away by the cruel hands of death at the prime of life. But he made a considerable contribution towards building up the cultural atmosphere in the family. He used to take an uncommon interest in the theatre and, consequently, the promotion of this interest became one of his passions. Due to him, staging of plays in the family became one of the principal diversions of the members of the family. This acted as an incentive not only for writing dramas but also for carrying on experiments in new dramatic techniques. In later years, this provided the necessary scope for the development of Rabindranath's talents in this particular field.

Ganendranath was also imbued with intense patriotic feelings. That provided him with the inspiration for carrying on some pioneering efforts calculated to encourage the growth of nationalistic feelings among Bengalis. With the help of his friend Nabagopal Mitra, he started a fair called the Hindu Mela to help in the growth of patriotic sentiments through songs, staging of plays and also in popularising the indigenous goods produced by country artisans by displaying them there. The fair was opened for the first time on April 12, 1867, which fell on the Chaitra Sankranti, the last day of the Bengali year. It remained an annual feature of the cultural life of Calcutta for over a decade and effectively promoted the interest it was meant to serve. It provided the necessary incentive to the people of the country in general and to the members of the Tagore family in particular for the cultivation of nationalistic feelings. When Rabindranath was sufficiently grown up to take interest in its affairs, it produced similar effects on his mind. There is evidence that he participated in its programme on two occasions by reading poems composed by himself, expressing patriotic sentiments.

Debendranath's second son, Satyendranath (1842-1923), distinguished himself as a meritorious student. He belonged to the batch of students which appeared in the first entrance examination conducted by the Calcutta University in 1857 just after it had been founded. He passed it in the first division and took admission in

the Presidency College. He successfully competed in the Indian Civil Service Examination in 1863 and after a year of probation was posted to the Bombay Presidency. He thus distinguished himself as the first Indian to be appointed as a member of the Indian Civil Service.

During his official career, he exercised special influence on Rabindranath and was to some extent responsible for the shaping of his future life. It was under his advice that his father agreed to Rabindranath being taken to the United Kingdom for higher education. In fact it was he who escorted Rabindranath both in his journey to England in 1878 and back on the expiry of his furlough. That provided Rabindranath with an opportunity to come in close contact with European society and also helped him to assimilate the general principles of Western music, a factor which contributed to some degree in imparting a distinctive character to his musical compositions.

Debendranath's third son, Hemendranath (1844-84), who died at the age of forty, also deserves a reference in this connection. His contribution to the building up of a cultural atmosphere in the family and giving it a nationalistic bias was not inconsiderable. He had varied interests. Having interest in the medical sciences, he studied in the Medical College of Calcutta for some time. He also took keen interest in wrestling and encouraged wrestling among his younger brothers, including Rabindranath.

But his greatest passion was his desire to educate the members of his family. His patriotism made him insist that the medium of instruction should be Bengali which was their mother-tongue. In those days, girls used to be married young and there was little scope for them for learning to read and write. So his first concern was to make the daughters-in-law of the family literate. He shouldered the task of teaching them himself. As regards younger brothers and sisters, he also joyfully undertook to give them their first lessons. Rabindranath thankfully acknowledges that he owed much of his grounding in Bengali to Hemendranath.

It appears that, Rabindranath apart, the Maharshi's fifth son, Jyotirindranath (1849-1925), was the most gifted among his sons.

His greatness is somewhat dwarfed by the greater achievements of his younger brother who far outshone him. Even so, he could claim a position of distinction in many fields by virtue of his own intrinsic merit. He was a good pianist and had an aptitude for original musical composition. In this matter, he was ably helped by his friend Akshoy Choudhuri and younger brother Rabindranath. He evolved a system of notation for Bengali music which still enjoys wide practice. He also brought out a magazine dealing exclusively with music, claimed by some authorities as the first of its kind in Bengali literature.

His main point of interest, however, was writing and staging dramas. In this matter, he was a worthy successor of Ganendranath. No wonder he became both a successful dramatist and an actor at an early age. It was in the course of writing a play named *Sarojini*, dealing with a heroic episode of Rajput history, that he developed an immense liking for his talented youngest brother Rabindranath, after which event they became close collaborators in literary pursuits.

In fact, individually, it was the versatility of Jyotirindranath which provided the greatest incentive for the development of the talents of young Rabindranath. Drawn close to him by common tastes and aptitude, he received valuable guidance and encouragement from his elder brother in developing his latent powers.

In this matter Jyotirindranath's worthy consort Kadambari Devi played an equally important role. She bore extreme affection for her talented brother-in-law and showered on him unbounded affection to compensate for the gloomy days of his childhood when he grew up as a neglected child of a numerous family. Being herself very fond of poetry, she proved a very sympathetic listener to the early compositions of this budding poet. She took particular care to see that his poetic talents were properly nurtured. While encouraging him to improve the quality of his poems by occasional words of appreciation, she would see to it that he did not become precociously conscious of his powers lest he should become conceited and slacken in his efforts at self-improvement.

III

BIRTH AND EARLY DAYS

RABINDRANATH WAS born on 25th Baisakh 1268, according to the Bengali calendar, corresponding to May 7, 1861, of the English calendar. With the passage of time, however, there is divergence between the two calendars, there being a tendency for the corresponding English date to fall behind. His birth anniversary is, however, strictly observed on the 25th of Baisakh of the Bengali calendar.

He was the last but one child of his parents. The youngest child, however, died in early infancy and in effect Rabindranath became the youngest child and also the youngest son of the family. We shall refer to him as such.

Though not lacking in affection for her youngest child, his mother Sarada Devi was too much worn out in health by repeated childbirth to be able to bestow personal attention on him in his boyhood. Consequently, he was entrusted to the care of a nursemaid during his infancy, and when he grew up a little, there is clear evidence to show that he was left to the charge of the servants. This evidence comes directly from Tagore, principally in the form of his reminiscences recorded in his autobiography *Jivan Smriti*.*

* This book does not, however, give a complete account of his life. It was written after he was awarded the Nobel Prize and, therefore, carried the story of his life only up to his middle age. Afterwards he had no occasion to write about the later part of his life. But the book is enough for our present purpose, as it contains a graphic account of his early life and dispenses with the need for looking into second-hand material for information about it. This is supplemented with a book restricted to his boyhood only and reminiscences of isolated scenes of his early life recorded at random, occasionally in the poems written by him in his old age. These compositions not only provide invaluable supplementary information about his early days but being recorded in the form of poetry, have a literary charm of their own.

Rabindranath aptly names the early part of his life as the period of the monarchy of servants (*Bhrityakaraj Tantra*) and draws a comparison with the Slave Dynasty that ruled the Delhi Sultanate in the thirteenth century. When he was old enough to be able to remember things, he found that he had been handed over to the charge of the servants. They fed him, controlled his movements and were the only persons to whom he had access. No wonder he considered himself living as a subject of the kingdom of servants, as he humorously says in his recorded reminiscences.

The first servant who became the centre of interest in his boyhood was named Shyam. Rabindranath distinctly remembers Shyam's physical features and describes them. This servant was a grown-up boy of medium size with a dark complexion, and with long hair. Evidently, he had been assigned the specific duty of looking after Rabindranath. Left to his own sense of duty, it appears that this servant used to perform his duties perfunctorily and took recourse to dubious methods to control the movements of his charge. His favourite trick was to draw a circle on the floor of a room with a chalk and then to place the child within it. He would warn the child against crossing the line of the circle and threaten him with dire consequences if his order was violated. Somehow the boy felt overawed and lost his capacity to defy him.

So, young Rabindranath had no option but to face detention within that circle for the duration of the entire day. Luckily for him, there was a window within his reach which opened to the south. The window was fitted with venetian shutters. In the south of the compound of the family house was a small bit of open land where there was a pond fringed on the southern side with a line of coconut palms, while on the eastern bank stood an old banyan tree. By opening the venetian shutters, this entire landscape would open before his eyes. This visual contact with the outside world would provide diversion to while away his time. The pond used as a place for bathing, would be visited by different groups at different hours of the day who again adopted different methods of washing and bathing. This provided him an endless view of constantly shifting scenes and made his confinement somewhat bearable. As the day wore on and the afternoon drew near, the

pond would become completely deserted. At that part of the day it was only the ducks and the swans swimming in the tank which kept his company.

This life of boredom, partially compensated by the scenic beauty of the southern compound of the ancestral house, evidently made a deep impression on his mind. It recurs as the theme of a poem written in his old age which finds a place in a collection of verses.* A translation of the same is given below:

“I used to be confined to a room in
 a corner of our old house,
 Leaving which was strictly prohibited.
 There the servant was engaged in dressing up
 betel leaves and rubbing his hands on the wall,
 Singing in low voice the song composed by Madhukar.
 The room had a patent stone floor and was
 fitted with venetian shutters.
 Down below was a pond with masonry steps
 and a row of coconut palms close to the compound
 wall.
 An old banyan tree with matted hair held fast
 to the eastern bank with its thick roots.”

This enforced confinement within a room, with glimpses of nature outside, roused in the boy's mind a keen desire to have direct contact with nature. It seemed to him that nature was beckoning to him but he could not respond. This yearning for freedom from confinement would rouse strong emotions of disappointment in his immature mind. No wonder this became the theme of one of his poems composed in later life.**The poem speaks about two birds which once made contact—one confined in a cage, which evidently represented him, and the other enjoying complete freedom outside, which represented the condition he yearned for.

In contrast with his intense love of nature, he started hating city life more and more as he grew up, and ultimately found comfort

**Punascha, Balak*

***Sonar Tari, Dui Pakhi*

in living in the open country in rural areas. This experience of early boyhood thus exercised a profound influence not only on his poetry but also on his way of life.

His subjecthood in the kingdom of servants was not, however, a story of unrelieved misery. Among the servants, there was a noble exception in the person of Iswar, also called Brajeswar* who formed a class by himself. Having been a teacher of a village primary school in his early life, he tried to impress his difference with the common run of servants through his conduct and speech. In his reminiscences, Tagore paints him elaborately and, to add to its literary quality, infuses a lot of humour in it. This servant used to maintain a respectable distance from others of his kin and would deliberately adopt a literary form of speech when talking to the members of the family.

He used to be in-charge of the children of the family for the evenings and also it appears that he controlled the distribution of food to them. His literacy came to good purpose in helping him to devise a method for keeping the children engaged during the evenings. He would collect them round him in a room and in the dim light of the lamp which cast long shadows on the walls—there being no electricity in those days—give readings from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* in their Bengali versions. Rabindranath in particular used to listen to him with rapt attention, undisturbed by the lizards moving about on the walls in search of prey and the small bats circling around in the verandah outside. He particularly enjoyed the scene in which the twin brothers Kush and Lava inflict utter defeat on their father and uncle to wrest the sacrificial horse from them.

It appears that Iswar did not give the children entertainment altogether free of cost. He exacted a payment in an indirect way from the boys in his charge by depriving them of a valuable share of food. The fact is that he was addicted to opium and, consequently, was in need of nourishing food. He would help himself to this by adopting backhand methods. It appears that young Rabindranath, extremely intelligent that he was, guessed his motive and willingly

**Chelebela*

cooperated with him without making him feel it. Thus, when the allotted share of milk was offered to him, he expressed his unwillingness to drink the whole of it, so that what was left over would be appropriated by Iswar. Similarly, he would deliberately ask for cheap items like *muri* (baked rice) for tiffin so that the servant could make a saving out of the money allocated to him for this purpose and utilise it to meet his own needs.

When Rabindranath was grown up enough to defy the restrictions imposed by the servants, he would pass his time in exploring the different parts of his big sprawling ancestral house. There was a spacious roof over the first floor of the house with walls all round which were high enough for his stature to prevent a view of the surrounding lands. When it remained deserted at noon, he would steal a visit there and help himself to a view of the outside world by peeping through the slits in the walls. This would allow him an uninterrupted view of the garden attached to the house together with a row of coconut trees. A tank in the neighbourhood would also present itself with a cowshed nearby. At a distance lay unfolded the roof-tops of a vast expanse of houses reaching up to the horizon, their varying heights working out a curious pattern of the skyline of the city. Overhead was the blinding glow of the midday sun dotted here and there by moving spots which represented kites in flight whose shrill cries would occasionally break the silence of the dozing city.

During his boyhood, his father would, most of the time, remain away from home, spending his days on the hills of the Himalayas. Consequently, the suite of rooms reserved for him in the third storey of the house would remain closed. Rabindranath's spirit of adventure would prompt him to steal a visit to that part of the house and open a door stealthily by unhasping it. After thus effecting entry inside, he would take his seat on a sofa lying in a corner of the southern room to while away his time. In the bathroom attached to the suite, a filtered water tap had been recently fitted. It was too much for his inquisitive mind to resist the temptation of tinkering with it. So he would inevitably be drawn there and after releasing the tap, take a shower bath, not

so much because he needed it but for the sheer pleasure of making the tap work.

Things lying in the spacious compound outside also exercised strong attraction on his mind. There was an open piece of land situated to the north of the house which used to be called the *Golabari* probably because it had been used in the past as a place of storage of grains. It was a piece of fallow land left altogether unutilised but still it seemed to hold a mystery for him and if he could sneak his way to it, defying the vigilance of the servants, he would consider this an achievement which would provide him with considerable satisfaction.

In his boyhood days, the entire world appeared before his eyes with an aura of mystery. It appeared to him that nature was playing tricks with him by presenting riddles all round him and asking him to solve them. The whole world was a fascinating page uncovered before his eyes for him to read and decipher. What looked particularly wonderful to him was the fact that things grew in nature. A plant, for example, is at one stage a mere seed which when put in the soil sprouts into a small seedling which steadily grows on.

To observe the process of growth, he collected some earth and debris in a verandah in a corner of the house and planted the seed of a custard apple in it and then started watering it. The idea was that he would have the fascinating experience of seeing it grow and then flower and bear fruit. This was, of course, a wish which could not be consummated when the seed happened to be sown on a fistful of soil inside the house. The experience struck in his mind so deeply that it reappeared as the theme of a poem written in his old age. It is worthwhile to quote the relevant lines in translation here:

“I had a great desire in my mind
to plant a seed of custard apple
myself and pluck its fruit.
I was then only nine years of age.
I would be struck with wonder to
think how something could grow

out of something.

There was a spacious verandah
adjoining the reading room in the first floor,
Where I collected dust and debris
in a corner (for this purpose).”*

But the thing that exercised the greatest attraction on Rabindranath’s mind was the little kingdom of nature that flourished in the outer compound of the house. There was open space both to the east and to the south of the main building. In the southern part was a tank fringed with coconut fronds on its south with an old banyan tree standing guard at one corner on its eastern bank. There was a fairly well laid out garden to the east which was also fringed by a row of coconut trees.

This small kingdom of nature helped him to kill his boredom during the days of his early childhood. When he grew up a little, it gave him the much-needed contact with nature which not only refreshed his mind but also had a hand in developing his poetic faculty. Nature in her varying moods not only appealed to his aesthetic sense but also helped the growth of his imagination.

This little oasis of rural atmosphere in the wilderness of urban life went a long way towards providing nourishment to his poetic fancy. In fact, it provided him the same joy as did the wide expanse of hills and dales interspersed with cataracts and lakes in which Wordsworth found himself placed in his boyhood. What profound influence it exercised on Tagore’s poetic mind can be measured from the following quotation from one of his reminiscences recorded in old age:

“The wonder of the gathering clouds hanging heavy with the unshed rain, the sudden sweep of storms arousing vehement gestures along the line of coconut trees, the fierce loneliness of the summer noon, the silent sunrise behind the dewy veil of the autumn morning, kept my mind with the intimacy of a pervasive companionship.”**

No wonder the first duty he found himself called upon to perform on waking up in the morning was to keep his appointment

**Charar Chabi, Atarbichi*

***Religion of Man, The Vision*

with nature. 'To give his welcome to the morning sun, he would take particular care to wake up long before sunrise and go down to the eastern garden and treat himself to the spectacle of sunrise with its mild rays gleaming through the coconut palms. It was such a thing of beauty to his sensitive eyes that he recalls it in one of his poems written in old age. A few lines from the same translated into English, run as follows:

"I would leave my bed and go down to the garden, long before the crows cawed lest I should miss the benediction showered by the rising sun on the trembling coconut fronds."*

Though Tagore's mother could not pay any personal attention to him, she undoubtedly had a soft corner for him. This was only natural considering the fact that he was her youngest child. This affection was reciprocated by her son also. He would not hesitate to thrust himself into her attention or even deprive her of her small pleasures of life to promote his own interest. A few pieces of information collected from his reminiscences will bring out the charm of this sweet relationship.

During his early boyhood, Rabindranath was placed under the charge of private tutors to learn his lessons. At times, such lessons proved so boring to him that he would look for a pretext to avoid them. The trick that he would usually play on such occasions was to feign that he was suffering from stomach-ache. He would plead to his mother for exemption from taking lessons. It was not at all difficult for his mother to see through his game, but her affection for him would prove too strong for her to desist from granting his prayer.**

Another method by which he imposed himself on his mother was of frequent occurrence. After listening to the reading of the *Ramayana* by Brajeswar, he was expected to retire for the night. But he had to be lulled to sleep by fairy tales. An aunt of his mother who lived in the house was a good teller of tales and so Rabindranath would very much want to appropriate her for the purpose. This,

**Shesh Saptak*, No. 46

***Chelebela*

however, clashed with the interest of his mother who was fond of playing cards with the aunt. Not infrequently, Rabindranath would create such a row over monopolising the attention of the grand-aunt that the mother had to yield and stop her game of cards so that her son could have the indulgence of listening to fairy tales.*

When Rabindranath was still in his early boyhood, there was an episode which is interesting in many ways. For one thing, it shows the young boy's deep concern for his mother. For another, it led to an interesting development which established the way for easy contact between this youngest son of the family and the absolute master of the house. It was in the late sixties of the last century, when the threat of a Russian invasion of British territory in India raised a scare among the people. The news in due course reached the ears of his mother and being worried about the safety of her husband, who used to spend his days in the north-west border of India, she was anxious to send him a letter requesting him to return home.

Not having the capacity to write a letter herself, she approached the elder members of the family to help her in the matter. But none responded, presumably because they did not take the scare seriously. She approached young Rabindranath and asked him to write the letter. Rabindranath responded with warmth and, not knowing how to write a letter himself, somehow managed to send such a letter after all with the co-operation of the Munshi in charge of the office which managed the family estates. The letter did reach the hands of his father who also took the trouble of replying to it. As to the contents of the reply, let us hear what Tagore says himself:

“I did get a reply to my letter. Father wrote back to say that there was nothing to be afraid of and if necessary he would drive away the Russians himself. This strong word of assurance did not seem to allay the fear entertained by mother about the Russians but my courage to confront father increased manifold.”**

Rabindranath's mother used to hold sittings in the afternoons on the roof in the eastern part of the house where the women of

**Chelebela*

***Jivan Smriti*, Pitridev

the family used to gather round her and while away their time in sundry talks. Rabindranath enjoyed free access to this gathering when he had grown up a little and started attending school. If he had picked up any new fact of science or history, he would take particular care to announce it to this gathering. The affectionate mother would not hesitate to respond to it by giving him an appreciative look and a pat on his back.

Such was Rabindranath's mother. Unfortunately, she died quite young. Tagore was then barely fourteen years of age and missed her very badly. Even long after her death, he would find solace in remembering the soothing touch of her affectionate fingers which bore comparison to the cream-white buds of the *bel* flower, as he says in his reminiscences.

IV

EDUCATION

IN THE family there was an elaborate provision for all round training of both the mind and the body. In due course Rabindranath had to submit himself to it. To his third brother Hemendranath fell the self-imposed duty of supervising it. The training included besides reading lessons, wrestling for physical development and music for creating a taste for fine arts. Tagore gives an elaborate account of these arrangements in his book *Chelebela*.

The first training of the day was in wrestling. A wrestler named Hira Singh, nicknamed the Blind Wrestler, had been engaged to give lessons to the boys of the family under the supervision of Hemendranath who was himself a fine wrestler. The place assigned for the purpose was the open space to the north of the house known as Golabari. For these lessons, Rabindranath had to rise from bed quite early in the morning, long before sunrise. Evidently, he did not enjoy these lessons, particularly in the winter mornings. But he had no escape from them, so strict was the discipline enforced by Hemendranath. It is difficult to say whether this physical exercise had anything to do with it, but it is a fact that Tagore enjoyed a robust health till very old age.

As for the lessons in reading and writing, at the stroke of seven in the morning, the tutor would arrive. The lessons were in Bengali as insisted on by Hemendranath, and consisted of three subjects: mathematics, reading of Bengali texts which included the classic by Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, *Sitar Vanavasa*, and even elementary science. These lessons continued throughout the morning. Not that Rabindranath liked these lessons either. In fact, he very much wished that he or his tutor would fall ill. But, this wish was never fulfilled.

In addition to these, there were the lessons in music. Fortunately, in his early age, Rabindranath was placed in charge of a

teacher named Bishnu. He was not a renowned musician but he knew how music lessons could be made interesting to this uncommon child. He knew that he had to rouse the interest of his pupil and for this purpose, gave up the orthodox approach and used common-place Bengali nursery rhymes for these lessons. This produced the desired effect on the child and helped him to develop a grounding in music in early age.

It appears that in music as in respect of other subjects, Rabindranath had a natural repugnance to lessons being imposed on him. On the other hand, left to himself, he had a wonderful capacity to pick up tunes by merely listening to the masters. He was himself conscious of this trait. This is the reason why the lessons imparted to him at a later stage by Jadu Bhatta, one of the greatest masters of those days, proved altogether useless.*

It appears that Rabindranath's lessons in reading would have foundered against his natural resistance to imposed tasks but for his innate love for poetry. Evidently, he had a highly developed aesthetic sense which enabled him to put up with unpleasant experiences, if it could compensate by providing him aesthetic enjoyment in return. It appears that it is the discovery that written word could give him access to beauty that enabled him to go through the boredom of taking lessons for gaining mastery over the alphabet. He confesses that his first efforts to master his primer bored him completely. But, the realisation that reading lessons could open up this magic world of poetry worked on him like the proverbial carrot. He says:

“Suddenly I came to a rhymed sentence of combined words which may be translated as thus: ‘It rains, the leaves tremble.’ At once I came to a world where I recovered my full meaning. My mind touched the creative realm of expression and at that moment, I was no longer a mere student with his mind ruffled by spelling lessons, enclosed by a class-room.”**

After completing reading lessons at home, the boy was admitted to a school. Two other children of the family belonging to the same

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age-group, were being brought up along with him. They were his immediate elder brother Somendranath and his eldest sister's son, Satya, both of them two years older than he. They used to have reading lessons together at home, sleep in the same room and were also taken through the sacred thread ceremony together.

They were first admitted to the Oriental Seminar, a school in North Calcutta. Rabindranath's first experience in school—the teacher exercising absolute sway over his students—and enjoying the privilege of punishing them as he liked—impressed him deeply. It appears that one of his favourite methods of amusing himself after this was to assume the role of a teacher himself in the corner of the verandah of their house and treat the railings at its edge as the pupils.*

The initial charm, however, wore out soon. It appears that when the boys were shortly afterwards transferred to the Normal School, his experience there proved to be one of unmitigated abhorrence. He did not like to be shut within the four walls of the classroom. Nor did he like the impersonal manner in which the teachers conducted their lessons, there being no chance of affection growing up between the teacher and the pupil. His fellow-students might have helped him to break the monotony of school life, but they were of no help as their low taste and undesirable habits made him dislike them. So, during leisure periods and tiffin hours, he would prefer to be alone.

After a year's attendance, Rabindranath appeared in the annual examination conducted at his school. Surprisingly enough, he stood first in Bengali, perhaps the only distinction he ever achieved in school life.

It was at this stage that Rabindranath had his first lessons in composing poems. By a lucky stroke of events, a close relation of his, Jyotiprakash, decided to impart him lessons on the subject. Jyotiprakash was grandson of Girindranath, Rabindranath's uncle through a daughter and hence, was related to him as nephew. The boy was older than he by about seven years and was in his late

**Jivan Smriti*, Normal School

teens. Jyotiprakash showed Rabindranath how in poetry, the word at the end of a line had to rhyme with the last word of the previous line. With a natural aptitude for writing poems, Rabindranath immediately found himself deeply involved in this new hobby. He secured an exercise book of blue papers and started filling it up with poems composed by himself.

It was no doubt a very pleasant experience for the young poet himself, but the person who took the greatest delight in this performance was his immediate elder brother Somendranath. He felt so proud of this young brother that he would call the attention of the elderly friends of the family and read out to them these poems in the hope of snatching a word of appreciation from them. It is painful to think that this elder brother turned a mental patient in later life thus being prevented from enjoying the numerous triumphs of his gifted younger brother.

Soon, his reputation as a poet spread even to his school and one of his teachers expressed interest in his poetry. But the man whose appreciation this budding poet valued most was an elderly person named Srikrishna Sinha. He was a scion of the Zamindar family of Raipur which in later days sprung to fame when one of its members, Satyendra Prasanna Sinha, was made a baron by the British Government. He had been attracted to Maharshi by the latter's saintly character and was a frequent visitor to the house. He had the wonderful capacity of endearing himself to all members of the family. He became the most sympathetic listener of the poems written by the budding poet. We also owe a debt of gratitude to him, as it was because of him that we have a photo of Rabindranath showing how he looked when he was barely fourteen years of age.

At this stage, special arrangements were made for imparting the boys lessons in English under the supervision of a teacher named Aghore Babu. He used to give his lessons in the evenings. Needless to mention that these imposed lessons again proved extremely boring to Rabindranath. He used to feel so miserable that he would consider the birds luckier than himself as they did not know the art of lighting lamps and so, were spared the misfortune of taking lessons at night.

After some time, the boys were withdrawn from the Normal School and admitted to the Anglo-Indian school named Bengal Academy. Here, Tagore had an easier life than before because too much emphasis was not laid on learning of lessons and the students, though naughty, were not ill-behaved. Even so, the closed atmosphere of the school where he had to spend his time within the four walls of the class-room was not to his liking. He, therefore, looked for every pretext for running away from the school. In this, he found a sympathetic ally in the teacher whom his elder brothers had engaged for teaching Persian. He had a working knowledge of English and would readily write letters to his school authorities recommending leave of absence for Rabindranath. To his good luck, the recommendations would be promptly accepted.

In 1873, Debendranath came back home for a few weeks. The sacred thread ceremony of the three boys was performed on this occasion. After that, Debendranath took Rabindranath with him to the Himalayas to spend a few months with him. The visit to the Himalayas not only enabled the young Tagore to come in very close contact with his father which produced a tremendous impact on his mind, but also proved to be a turning point in his life. While his father's saintly character and masterful personality helped to mould his character, the reading lessons imparted by his father widened his outlook and helped him develop new tastes. Perhaps it would not be wrong to assume that the father deliberately wanted to produce an impact on this young boy's mind having recognised that there was seed of greatness in him. Otherwise why should he selectively pick up Rabindranath out of a group of the three who were being brought up together in the family?

It was arranged that Rabindranath would spend about three months with his father. It was also decided that on the way to the hills, they would break journey and spend a few days at Santiniketan where his father had already built a garden house to spend time in meditation. The stay at Santiniketan also made a profound impression on his mind and long afterwards, played a significant part in shaping his future life. In fact, this was the first occasion in his life, when he was given freedom to roam about in the open

country, an altogether new experience for a boy who had spent all his life in the cooped up atmosphere of city.

No wonder, the short stay at Bolpur proved a thrilling experience to this young boy. It is a rough country with vast expanses of unfertile rolling land subjected to heavy erosion, with occasional clusters of palmyra plants. His father imposed no restriction on his movements in this vast wilderness. This made him feel like Livingstone exploring the wilderness of Africa. While the movement of rain water along fissures on the land fascinated him, he took particular delight in collecting pebbles of various sizes and making a present of them to his father, whose appreciative gesture gave added value to his exertions. No wonder, his memory carried a very pleasant impression about the place, to be treasured up for recall in old age. In fact, he did recall it in a poem written in his late life which speaks of the place as follows:

“I came here when a boy.
 In its caves and holes and by its babbling brooks
 my imagination has spun tales of mystery.
 I have played with pebbles
 in solitary noons all by myself.*”

Rabindranath fell in love with this place at first sight. Perhaps it is this deep bond of attachment that drew him to this place in later life when he decided to open a school for his son in rural setting and incidentally, this became the permanent place of residence for him for the rest of his life.

After that, the father and the son went to Dalhousie. They got a cottage at Bakrota in idyllic setting. With the snowcapped Himalayas in the background and the vast expanse of the foothills in front, the house was set in a pine forest. Here also, Rabindranath enjoyed complete freedom of movement and this was again a thrilling experience.

But the wise father did not mean that the son's days should pass in exclusive enjoyment of the beauties of nature; he had also intended to provide serious work for him. It appears that

**Punascha*, Khowai

Debendranath had planned an intensive course of education for his son. The set of books he had brought for this purpose included Peter Parley's *Tales*, *The Life of Benjamin Franklin*, Proctor's *Astronomy* and the second volume of *Riju Patha*, a Sanskrit reader compiled by Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar. He would give lessons to the son thrice a day—early in the morning, after breakfast followed by a morning walk, and after the midday meal. The method of teaching did not follow the traditional path at all. What was intended was that the student should participate in the lessons so that his thinking capacity could be stimulated. Thus, while giving lessons in Sanskrit, he would encourage his son to compose sentences in that language. This in later life developed in Rabindranath an abiding interest in Sanskrit literature.

Similarly, the lessons on astronomy would not stop with the transmission of mere information about the heavenly bodies, but would be followed by practical lessons. When the sun had set and the night had blacked out everything on earth, the sky in contrast would be lit up by the myriads of stars which would appear in their dazzling brilliance in the clear atmosphere of the hills. The father would then take his pupil out and point out to him the important planets and stars and draw his attention to the peculiar formation of the different constellations.* These lessons in astronomy not only widened his horizon, but also helped him to develop his sense of wonder, great assets for a poet who was destined to earn a worldwide fame. This was also responsible for developing his interest in science. This imparted to his poems a special quality, his grand conceptions invariably maintaining conformity with scientific facts. His serious writings not unoften refer to analogies drawn from science.

Evidently, after his return from the Himalayas, Rabindranath's personality asserted itself. He could now give expression to his repugnance to school education by boldly boycotting it. The head of the family was an absentee. The brothers tried another experiment. They withdrew him from Bengal Academy and got him admitted to the St. Xavier's school. This hardly made any

* *Viswaparichaya*

difference although the piety and dignified conduct of the missionary teachers impressed him a great deal. The scolding of the elder brothers produced no result. Ultimately, of his own initiative, he gave up attending school altogether. In vain the eldest sister Saudamini Devi protested that the great hopes she had entertained about her dear Rabi were thereby dashed to the ground.*

Paradoxically enough, left to himself, he started seriously his own self-education. That he hated school life did not necessarily mean that he did not want to be educated. Rather, he had a great thirst for education; only he hated the method of imparting education obtaining in schools. Left to himself, he did not adhere to a set course but read according to his own inclination. That he took the process of self-education seriously will be evident from the manner in which he proceeded.

He had a natural attraction for books which would not be made accessible to students reading in schools. So he would adopt dubious methods for obtaining possession of them. For example, a comic play written by Dinabandhu Mitra, the famous author of *Nildarpan*, had been kept under lock to prevent the youngsters from having access to it. But young Tagore managed to gain the access by stealing the key to the box from the lady incharge.

This young boy had a natural attraction for serious subjects. He was drawn to a journal bearing the pompous title *Bibidhartha Sangraha* from the personal library of his third brother. He also found access to another monthly journal named *Abodh Bandhu* from the personal library of his eldest brother. A compilation of old Bengali poetry of the Vaisnava poets belonging to the family library, fascinated him so much that he decided to produce a book in that style under a pseudonym, when he was still in his teens. We shall have occasion to deal with this in detail at the proper stage.

When he was seventeen, his second brother Satyendranath suggested that Rabindranath should go to the United Kingdom to prepare himself for the Bar. He even managed to obtain his father's consent to the proposal. It was decided that he would take his

**Jivan Smriti*, Pratyavartan

younger brother with him when he would leave for the United Kingdom on a long leave. His wife and children had preceded him there and were living at Brighton. It was further decided that as a preparation for his stay in England and to help him to pick up English manners, Rabindranath should go over to Satyendranath who was then posted as the District Judge of Ahmedabad.

So, young Tagore went over to Shahibag, Ahmedabad. It so happened that the residence of the District Judge had been the palace of a Muslim chief who used to live there with his harem. This spacious stately building situated on the bank of the Sabarmati was too lonely a place for young Tagore, with nobody to keep him company during the long hours of the day when his elder brother would be kept busy with official duties. It, however, helped to stir his imagination deeply enough on account of its association with the past to provide him the theme in later life for one of his famous short stories, *Kshudhita Pashan*, also known as 'Hungry Stones' in its English version. It is purely a work of imagination which revives the old scenes of the court and the harem of the princeling who had lived there. Happily, the endless leisure at his disposal inspired Tagore to utilise it to acquire a command over the English language. He started reading English books with the help of a dictionary.

The young brother's enforced loneliness did not escape the notice of his sympathetic elder brother who decided to place him in the charge of a Parsi family in Bombay. This he believed would serve the double purpose of providing him company and simultaneously, helping him to develop a mastery over English through conversation. It was here that he was brought in contact with a smart young vivacious girl of the family who had brushed up her education in England. It appears that they became intimate which more than compensated for his lonely days at Shahibag. The relationship even took a colouring of romance for it seems that at her behest, he gave her a new name and even composed a song on it. This gave her immense delight and in return she complimented him for his physical features. Unfortunately, the lady died quite young in life.

The two brothers left for the United Kingdom in September 1878. After reaching England, Rabindranath stayed for a few weeks with his brother's family at Brighton where he got himself admitted to a local school. After that, he shifted to London for attending to his regular course of studies under the advice of a friend of the family, Taraknath Palit, the famous barrister and philanthropist.

At first, he stayed in a boarding house at Regent Park where he used to feel very lonely. Afterwards, he moved to the family of one Dr. Scott, where he felt very comfortable. He thankfully remembers that Mrs. Scott and her three daughters used to treat him as though he was a member of the family. He felt that he would not have been in a happier atmosphere even with his close relations.

In London, Tagore got himself admitted to the University College. It was here that he came in contact with Loken Palit, son of Taraknath Palit. Although Tagore was four years older than Loken, a deep friendship grew up between them. Similar in temperament and holding common interests, they used to pass their leisure time in discussing poetry and literature. Young Palit subsequently qualified for the Indian Civil Service and was posted to Bengal. The friendship that grew up in their student days continued throughout life. They carried a dialogue through letters on the aesthetics of literature which provoked Tagore to express weighty views on literature and poetics. These have enriched his contributions to aesthetics.

Unfortunately Tagore could not complete the course of studies he had undertaken in London. It was abruptly terminated by a directive from his father that he should return home along with his elder brother, whose furlough was due to expire. So, in February 1880, he returned to Calcutta.

This short stay in London, however, enabled Tagore to pick up a fairly good acquaintance with Western music. He noticed its difference from Indian music, both as regards content and style. European music, according to him, picks up subjects from a wide field and appears to be intimately connected with the ordinary day-

to-day life of man. Indian music in contrast, selects its subject from a restricted field which is removed from the trivialities of ordinary life. What particularly excited his admiration for Western music was its romantic character, which, according to him, signifies variety, exuberance of feeling, dynamic quality and vastness. Not that Indian music lacks these qualities, but they are not present, according to him, in such abundance.* His sojourn in England was also utilised by him for acquiring a grounding in Western music. This stood him in good stead in later life when he faced the task of composing his own songs. His capacity for assimilation enabled him to blend Western tunes with Indian music and impart to his compositions a distinctive quality.

**Jivan Smriti, Vilati Sangeet*

V

DEVELOPMENT OF LITERARY TALENTS

TO BE born as the youngest member of a numerous family is not necessarily a misfortune. Under favourable circumstances, it may turn out to be an asset. Tagore's case is an example in point. If his inborn genius was a major factor in making him an outstanding literary figure, the environment in the family was no less important factor in unfolding it. Tagore himself was very conscious of this as he confirms in his reminiscences. "In early age I had a great advantage that an atmosphere of literary activities pervaded the house day and night. Their enthusiasm for literary and artistic pursuits was unbounded, as if they were trying by all possible ways to usher in the modern era of Bengal. Dress and costumes, poems and music, painting, staging of dramas, religious discourses, patriotic activities—in respect of all such matters, their minds were dominated by a comprehensive ideal of nationalism."*

Tagore's intense feeling of patriotism again infused by the family atmosphere provided the incentive for developing his literary talents. The atmosphere of patriotism prevailed in the family over several generations. Tagore's grandfather Dwarkanath set the tone for it. Though he mixed intimately with the members of the European society, he never gave up the Indian style of living. He loved it so intensely that even in his long sojourn in England, he continued to dress in Indian style and used to take delight in smoking the *hukka*. This spirit was inherited by his sons. His youngest son, Nagendranath created quite a stir in Calcutta social circle by disembarking from the ship dressed immaculately in Indian style when he returned home after his father's death in

**Jivan Smriti*, Barir Abhawa

England. Debendranath always insisted that correspondence between family members should strictly be in Bengali.

The tradition not only continued in the next generation but was even intensified. Satyendranath took delight in composing patriotic songs in Bengali. In collaboration with his elder cousin Ganendranath and Nabagopal Mitra, he organised the Hindu Mela in Calcutta to encourage the growth of patriotic feelings among his countrymen and to promote the sale of indigenous goods. Hemendranath insisted that the members of the family should study Bengali and develop their command over the language. The Hindu Mela provided Tagore the scope to give expression to his feelings about his land of birth, in poetry. It appears that on two occasions, he participated in the programmes of the Hindu Mela by reciting his poems on India. The first occasion was in 1875 when he was only fourteen years of age. It was considered so important an event that it was reported in the leading daily next day.* The theme of the poem imagines the sage Vyas sitting on the Himalayas recalling the glory of India's past and contrasting it with the present lowly state and poses the question:

“Will the ashes of India's past glory
kindle again a blazing fire
and light up the world?”

His sensitive mind was fully conscious of the insignificant role played by the Bengali of his day and fired by patriotic thoughts he keenly felt that somebody should undertake to wipe out this disgrace. Thus in an essay he observes: “After remaining silent for long years, the heart of Bengal is surcharged with ideas. Let her speak out her own feelings in her own language. The chorus of the world will be made sweeter when the Bengali takes part in it.”**

He was proud of his country's ancient past. He strongly wished that India should be reinstated to her position of glory. This desire finds expression in one of his sonnets which finds place, in his book of verse *Naivedya*.

**Indian Daily News*, February, 15, 1875

***Vichitra Prabandha*

The availability of more than one literary journal run by the family acted as a direct incentive to his writing. The *Tattvabodhini Patrika* published one of his earliest poems, *Abhilash*, towards the end of December 1874, when he was barely thirteen.* Later, when he was still in his teens, he became a regular contributor to the other family journal *Sadhana*.

The greatest incentive came from Kadambari Devi, the worthy wife of Jyotirindranath. She came to the family when Rabindranath was only seven years old. Felt attracted to this gifted brother-in-law, she smothered him with affection. He carried this memory even to his old age and reminisces in the following words:

“In my life when the first daughter-in-law
 came to our house from outside,
 My mind was like a boat in anchor,
 but a tide came roaring to toss it about.
 Providence brought me bounty overflowing
 the measured ration of happiness.”**

When his mother died in his early age, it was this loving sister-in-law who took upon herself the task of looking to his comforts and showering on him the necessary affection to lighten his grief. After that she would always keep him with her even when she would shift with her husband to places away from the ancestral house, except for the short spell when he was away in the United Kingdom.

This remarkable lady not only loved literature but took keen interest in it, particularly in poetry. Dwijendranath, the eldest brother of the family had for his friend the most gifted poet of the time, Beharilal Chakravarty. The latter became a regular visitor to their house. His poetic qualities so much excited her admiration that Kadambari Devi would entertain him by serving food cooked by herself. She even presented him with an *Asan* (a carpet piece used to sit on) embroidered by herself, in which she quoted a few lines of verse from his famous book, *Sarada Mangal*.

**Tattvabodhini Patrika*, Agrahayan 1796 Sakabda

***Akash Pradeep*, Kancha Am

Taking such delight in poetry, she naturally felt interested in the poetic talent displayed by her young brother-in-law and encouraged him in his efforts. But, she would take particular care to avoid the growth of any feeling of undue pride in him. She wanted him to develop his powers to his utmost and, therefore, would never let him know that he was progressing very well indeed. Even she would not unoften plague him with taunting remarks to root out any feeling of conceit.*

Unfortunately, this charming lady committed suicide for some unknown reason in 1884. Tagore records in his reminiscences that he had never before felt the sting of death so sharply as on this occasion. Overwhelmed with a sense of deep gratitude, he dedicated two of his books, published shortly after this shocking event, to her memory.

The first of these is *Saisab Sangeet*, a collection of poems composed by him when he was still in his teens. More mature writings had been published before. Evidently, the death of the sister-in-law who provided him the inspiration to write them acted as the incentive for its belated publication. They cannot claim high literary quality but have historical importance as supplying specimens of his earliest writings. The words recorded in the dedication read in translation:

“I dedicate these poems to you. It is long ago that I used to write them in your presence and read them out to you. They carry the memory of your affection. So I am led to think that wherever you are, these poems will not escape your eyes.”

The other book is *Bhanu Sinha Thakurer Padavali*. It has some interesting features of its own. Under his sister-in-law's encouragement, Tagore wrote a number of poems following the *Padavalis* of the Vaisnava poets. They were published in the different issues of the family journal *Bharati*, between 1877 and 1881. They were such perfect imitations of the originals that they created quite a stir among research scholars and one of them even ventured to write out a thesis identifying the author with a poet

**Jivan Smriti*, Sahityer Sanghi

of the mediaeval times. In spite of his sister-in-law's request Tagore was reluctant to publish in the first instance the compilation as he found no literary qualities of his own reflected in them. It is her memory again that provided the incentive to publish these poems. The touching dedication reads:

“You had requested me to publish the collection of poems written under the pseudonym Bhanu Sinha. I did not comply with your request then. I have published it today, but you are not here to see it.”

It is now time to trace the growth of Tagore's poetry through the early formative stage to the stage of maturity. It appears that three distinct phases of growth are noticeable. We may have already noted that even from his early childhood, Tagore developed an intense love of nature. That was naturally the inspiration for his poems in the early formative stage, which Tagore very aptly calls the copy-book stage of his poetry.* The idea is that at this stage his efforts were more directed to imitating established poets. One example is *Bhanu Sinha Thakurer Padavali*. The other example is the collection of poems published under the title *Saisab Sangeet*. There is indication that he was influenced here by the poet Beharilal Chakravarty, the friend of the family. This is reflected both in the rhymes adopted by him and the description of scenes, though admittedly they carry promise of future greatness.

Tagore himself says that he crossed the threshold of the copy-book stage of his poetry in his book of poems, *Sandhya Sangeet*. The poems included in this collection bear the impress of his own style for the first time. It was definitely a step forward towards maturity and he was immensely delighted to realise this.**

Its significance escaped the eyes of many, but not the discerning eye of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, the greatest literary figure of this age, who made no mistake in reading in it the happy news of the advent of another literary giant. His compliment came in the form of a gesture which is worth mentioning briefly. Romesh Chunder Dutt, another great literary figure of the time was

**Preface to Sandhya Sangeet*

***Ibid*

celebrating his daughter's marriage to which both Bankim Chandra and Rabindranath were invitees. It so happened that both arrived simultaneously, Bankim Chandra coming just ahead of the other. Romesh Chunder welcomed the great literary figure by putting garland on his neck while Rabindranath looked on. Bankim Chandra thereupon took off the garland and placed it on the neck of Rabindranath and simultaneously passed the significant remark: "This garland should go to him (Rabindranath). Romesh, have you read his *Sandhya Sangeet*? *

Unfortunately, the poems in this collection did not reflect the characteristic spirit of his poems which generally overflow with a feeling of well being and optimism. This book in contrast, was pervaded by an outlook of sorrow and melancholy. The dominant note is one of frustration and loneliness. Maybe, that is why it was named *Sandhya Sangeet* (the song of the evening).

Tagore himself was conscious of it and was also able to diagnose the reason for it. At this stage, he had mastered the technique of writing poems, but somehow had lost contact with nature. His mind had been driven within itself and made him feel lonely and forsaken.

The restoration of the bond with nature was accomplished under very dramatic circumstances. Young Rabindranath was then living in a house rented by his brother Jyotirindranath in Sudder Street which overlooked a row of tall trees fringing the Free School Street, Calcutta. As he came out to the open balcony one morning, he saw the glory of the rising sun behind the screen of the trees dispelling the veil of the morning mist. The impact of the scenic beauty broke the spell of his isolation. He felt the exhilaration of a man released from confinement within a cave. This provided the inspiration for the famous poem *Nirjharer Swapna Bhanga* (The break of the spell of the Cataract) which appears in his next book of verses, *Prabhat Sangeet*.

A translation of his own assessment of this experience is given below:

"At last one day, I do not know how, the bolted door was broken open and I got back what I had lost. I did not merely get it back

**Jivan Smriti*, Prabhat Sangeet

but through the barrier of separation, got a fuller idea of it. That is why I got much more when in the *Prabhat Sangeet*, I got back the world of my childhood. Thus easy access to nature followed by separation and reunion marked the end of an episode in the first chapter of my life.”*

The *Prabhat Sangeet* thus marks the end of the second phase of the formative stage of Tagore’s poetic life. We find a note of cheerfulness in the poems of this new collection. It is here for the first time that we get poems which bear the mark of Tagore’s genius though they had not yet attained maturity. In his own assessment, this book makes available to the reader the first fruits of his poetic efforts.**

After that, Tagore’s poetry made a rapid advance towards maturity. This seal of maturity is noticeable in *Kori-O-Kamal* published in 1886. It reflects the characteristic features of his poetry like a strong note of optimism and a style in which human attributes are ascribed to different parts of nature and even to inanimate objects. To his eyes nature is not dead but pulsating with life. The seasons are dancing maidens, the sunlight reflected on the dew drop is a message of love from the sun. The stars lighting up the night sky are so many heads of cattle being grazed about by an unseen cowherd. Even abstract ideas take concrete shape as living things. These new features are noticeable for the first time in *Kori-O-Kamal*.

Tagore’s literary efforts were diversified from the beginning. Apart from poetry, he made rapid progress in other fields as well. By the turn of the century, we find him established as a writer of distinction in many fields.

His first book of plays, *Rudra Chanda*, was published in 1881, when he was barely twenty. The same year, he wrote *Valmiki Pratibha* which adopted the story of the transformation of the robber chief Ratnakar into a great poet by the grace of goddess Saraswati.

**Preface to Prabhat Sangeet*

***Jivan Smriti. Valmiki Pratibha*

The play was staged in the ancestral house of the family at Jorasanko and the members of the family took part as actors. Tagore himself appeared in the role of Valmiki. The elite of Calcutta, including Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Gurudas Banerjee, the eminent jurist were invited to witness the performance. Impressed by the play greatly, the latter recorded his compliment in the form of a verse in which he hailed Tagore as the new Valmiki.

In *Valmiki Pratibha*, Tagore carried out with success an experiment with a new idea. The drama is written in songs on the lines of the opera but is somewhat different from an opera. Tagore himself points out that in contrast with the opera where the music receives more attention than the play, here the development of the play is the objective while songs play a minor role as an aid to embellish the speech of the actor.* To distinguish it from the opera he calls it *Gitinatya* (song-play). The play is further distinguished by another new feature in that here he experimented with new tunes for the songs. His approach was eclectic. He not only adopted Indian classical tunes but also borrowed liberally from the tunes composed by his elder brother Jyotirindranath. He also took full advantage of his acquaintance with Western music and adapted some tunes. He had developed a particular fascination for the Irish Melodies composed by Muir and did not hesitate to apply the tune of one of its songs to a song of this play.**

The next drama produced by Tagore is *Visarjan* in blank verse, which has for its theme an experience obtained in a dream. This is one of the finest dramas in Bengali literature.

Tagore's first novel *Bowthakuranir hat* published in 1883 is evidently immature. The next novel *Rajarshi*, which shares the theme of *Visarjan*, reveals little beyond a promise of future greatness. It was published in 1887. But, *Chokher Bali* published in 1903 surprisingly records a considerable advance. It is a fine novel giving all the indications of Tagore's maturity in the field.

**Jivan Smriti*, Valmiki Pratibha

***Ibid*

During the long gap between the publication of *Rajarshi* and *Chokher Bali*, Tagore experimented in writing short stories. In the nineties of the last century, his main preoccupation was stories and he produced scores of them which have found place in his *Galpa Guchha*. They established his reputation as a great short story writer.

So, by the turn of the century, we find Tagore equally well at ease in poetry, drama, fiction and short story. It may not be far from truth to say that had he given up writing at this stage, he would have still remained as the most versatile figure in the history of Bengali literature, though the world would have missed much.

Tagore did not rise to such position of unique prestige without opposition. The contemporary writers wedded to conservative ideas started a tirade of criticism which was not unoften cruel and extremely unkind. The writers who took a leading part in this campaign were Kaliprasanna Kavaya-Visharad, a poet, and Dwijendralal Roy, a poet and playwright who by his own right can claim a place of distinction in Bengali literature.

Kaliprasanna brought out a book in verse named *Mitte Kara* in which he tried to put Tagore to ridicule by imitating the style of poems in Tagore's *Kori-O-Komal*. Dwijendralal's attack would sometimes assume the form of parody of Tagore's poems and at others take the form of regular essays. Not that he did not appreciate the power behind Tagore's pen, but he pleaded that that was all the more reason why Tagore should be attacked without compunction, as powerful writers are capable of greater mischief than indifferent writers.* He felt that Tagore was altogether indifferent to moral principles and so, his writings were likely to corrupt society. The climax of this attack came when Tagore published his Bengali *Gitanjali* and attained the height of his powers. It came in the form of a play, *Ananda Biday*. The hero of this play is modelled after Tagore as Dwijendralal imagined him to be, the main object being to put Tagore to ridicule to the utmost

*See his essay, *Kavya Niti*

possible extent. One very much wishes that Roy should have lived a couple of years more to see the target of his attack awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. But unfortunately he died just before the event.

It is not uncommon that great writers face severe criticism. Tagore bore all this criticism with unruffled courage and equanimity. There can be no doubt that his sensitive mind must have felt its sting sorely enough, but there was no hostile reaction. He neither belittled the importance of his critics as lacking in capacity to appreciate his works nor did he try to protect himself by putting on an armour of indifference. He did not counter-attack them either. He not only faced them with equanimity but was magnanimous enough to wish them well in return. There is evidence that he reacted to criticism in writing only on one occasion.*

He argued in a verse that if his poems were found lacking in quality, they would be ultimately rejected and forgotten and so there is no point in such sharp attacks. The poem ends with message of good wishes :

“Let your fame spread,
 Let your pen achieve distinction,
 Let the lustre of your talents,
 Rouse the admiration of the entire
 world.”

The question is why do such phenomena recur again and again in the history of literature? Perhaps the best answer comes from Wordsworth who himself had to meet bitter criticism in early life. After giving his best thought to the question, he came to the conclusion that it was a natural phenomenon in the field of literature. A powerful poet invariably happens to strike a note of departure from the literary style obtaining at his time, and being unfamiliar the reader fails to appreciate his work. It is the unfamiliarity that builds up prejudice and turns the reader into a hostile critic. He says in a letter to Lady Beaumont: “Never forget what, I believe, was observed to you by Coleridge that every great and original writer in proportion as he is great and original must himself create

**Manashi, Ninduker Prati*

the taste by which he is to be relished.” This view was also recorded in the “Essay supplementary to the preface to second edition” of his ‘Lyrical Ballads’. The above observation appears to indicate that Coleridge also shared his view.

Used to the artificiality and the gaudiness of the style set by Dryden and Pope before him, the reader of his time was not prepared to give Wordsworth a kindly reception. Naturally, he had to face criticism. It was only at a later stage when they became used to his style that his naturalism and simplicity of diction came to be appreciated as a welcome change and it was recognised that he had emancipated English poetry from the old tradition which has been rightly characterised as the prevailing tyranny of ‘wit writing’.

The theory applies with equal force to the case of Tagore. A few examples will suffice to bring out this point. It appears that Tagore attracted hostile criticism from his two principal critics for different reasons. While Kaliprasanna Kavaya-Visharad attacked his style, Dwijendralal attacked the contents, as according to him the works of Tagore did not conform to moral conventions. In both cases, the hostile attitude stemmed from the radically new approach of Tagore.

As has been already stated, Tagore’s new style was a departure from the old convention. Although Bengali poetry attained a high level of excellence in the writings of the Vaisnava poets in its early days, it slowly tended to degenerate. After the first chapter of glory, Bengali poets began to specialise in devotional epics and increasingly adopted a formal and rigid style. It is true that in the nineteenth century, lyrics were revived by Iswar Chandra Gupta who was the last Bengali poet to remain completely free from Western influence, but in conformity with the tradition of the time, he adhered to the old style and even intensified its defects. It did not matter if the subject was trivial, but what is deplorable was that he showed a marked preference for a very artificial style in which punning and alliteration were the main tricks. They very well bear comparison with the type of literature labelled ‘wit writing’ in English poetry.

The genius of Michael Madhusudan Dutt introduced some new features borrowed from the West, in Bengali poetry. His partiality for subjects from the old epics clearly betrays his preference for Milton whom evidently, he made his model. He introduced the sonnet in Bengali literature, while his powerful pen enabled him to develop a style of writing in blank verse, again a borrowed feature from the West which imparted a new dignity to Bengali literature. All this was desirable, no doubt, but it was after all a diversion. Although its novelty charmed the heart of the reader at the initial stage, the appeal soon wore out. The simplicity and charm of the old lyrics of the Vaisnava poets had altogether disappeared.

It was on this background that Tagore staged his appearance. The simplicity of his style was a departure from the old practice. What was, however, altogether new was his habit of attributing human qualities to inert objects, and even to abstract ideas. This is what proved too much for Kaliprasanna Kavaya-Visharad to put up with. One single example will help us to substantiate our point.

In the poem, *Jogia*, in his book, *Kori-O-Komal*, the theme is the wonderful experience of thrill enjoyed by the poet one fine sunny morning. While giving expression to this emotion, he used the phrase that the emotion of thrill was dancing from tree to tree. What he meant to say was obvious, namely, that the emotion of thrill felt in his heart had taken concrete shape in the form of the beauty of the sun's rays playing on the leaves of trees. The very conception was too unfamiliar to Kavaya-Visharad to appreciate and he ridiculed it as preposterous.

Tagore's poems, in Dwijendralal Roy's opinion, were sensuous and worked as an incentive to illicit love.

For instance, Tagore's *Chitrangada*, a drama in blank verse published in 1892, became the special target of his attack. Based on the story of romance between Arjun, the hero of the Mahabharata and Chitrangada, the princess of Manipur, it tackles a new idea in a very dramatic way. Chitrangada, a princess with very plain looks, who had won the love of her subjects by virtue of her manly

powers which gave them security, and motherly qualities, which smothered them with affection, was rejected by Arjun.

Taking it as an insult to her womanhood, she borrowed beauty from Madan, the God of love and again appeared before Arjun. This time, he fell an easy prey to her physical charms to feel bored however soon, after taking little time to reach satiety. Between the two Chitrangadas, one holding uncommon physical charms and the other plain in looks but endowed with extraordinary moral qualities, he ultimately exercised his choice in favour of the latter.

What Tagore wanted to make out was that love based on physical beauty wears out soon, but founded on moral qualities abides. This should look unexceptionable. But to Dwijendralal's eyes, this aspect of the story remained altogether undiscovered as he was obsessed with the superficial moral aspect of the story. He rejected it as altogether obnoxious, because the love between Arjun and Chitrangada does not enjoy the moral sanction of society. Not that he did not appreciate its fine literary qualities, but his indignation on this account was so great that he suggested that the book should be burnt.*

The trouble is that critics of this type look upon a literary work, which is after all a work of art, through a constricted vision. They fail to understand that the quality of a work of art has to be judged from a comprehensive point of view. Does the book as a work of art appeal to the aesthetic emotion of the reader, as a thing of beauty? If so, its total effect is bound to be good despite minor transgression of conventional moral rules, because after all, what is beautiful also promotes the interest of what is good.

*Criticism Published in *Sahitya*, 1316 B.S. Chaitra issue

VI

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE

TAGORE WAS married to Bhabatarini Devi on December 9, 1883. To suit the taste of this highly cultured family, she was given the new name Mrinalini Devi. There is dependable evidence to show that a deep conjugal love grew up soon after between this newly married couple.

Towards the end of 1890, Rabindranath paid his second visit to the United Kingdom. The fact that his friend Lokendranath and brother Satyendranath were taking long leave for a visit there evidently acted as an incentive. All the three went together and more or less stayed together in London. Mrinalini Devi did not accompany her husband probably because by that time they had their first two children and a third baby was on the way.

So, it became a journey without the family and meant for the poet a fairly long period of separation from his wife. Naturally, this sojourn became the occasion for writing letters to his dear wife. These letters have been preserved presumably at the instance of the wife herself who valued them as treasures not without reason. They were written in such affectionate tone that they would touch the heart of any sensitive reader. We need not go into the contents, for the very manner of addressing Mrinalini Devi will provide enough convincing evidence of the affection between them.

Mrinalini Devi being the wife of the youngest son of the family, came to be called in the conventional manner *Chhoto-Bow* or the youngest daughter-in-law. In his letters, Tagore started addressing her initially, in this manner. He used to place the word *bhai* before that, *Bhai Chhoto-Bow* became his customary term of address. In Bengali, someone is called *bhai* only when that person has become the object of deep affection. Subsequently, the poet's romantic

mind introduced a slight modification. He shortened the expression *Chhoto-Bow* into *Chhuti* which means holiday. *Bhai Chhuti*, therefore, would suggest that the husband used to look upon her as holiday incarnate, as an escape from the troubles and worries of the day-to-day life!

The second visit to England did not prove a satisfactory affair at all. The programme was for as long a stay as the leave granted to his companions would permit, but Tagore had not the patience to go through the whole of it. He deliberately cut it short and left England all by himself. From the diary maintained by him, it appears that he left India in August and reached London *via* Paris on September 10, 1890. He embarked a ship at Tilbury dock on his lone return journey on October 9, 1890.

The reason ascribed by him for this decision to return sooner was that life in London used to bore him. He did not derive any satisfaction from routines like exchanging courtesies, going about seeing places, making purchases and attending stage performances.* Evidently, there was another reason also. The separation from his wife and children felt like a nagging pain in his heart. In a letter to his wife posted at Aden in course of his journey to England he records a dream he had dreamt. He found himself carried to his wife and children lying in their bed. In course of recording this dream, he frankly confesses to the fact that he was keenly feeling their absence and that a strong yearning for returning to them was disturbing his mind.

Tagore had a particular attachment for the suite of rooms in his ancestral house in the western side of the big courtyard on the second floor. It was easily the best suite of rooms in the house, with open space both to the east and west and a spacious roof extending on the south. It was the favourite suite of rooms of Maharshi himself. When Maharshi gave up living in his ancestral house altogether, his son Jyotirindra shifted to this suite with his gifted wife Kadambari Devi. She refurnished it and to add to its beauty, set up a roof garden. The family members used to assemble

**Europe Jatrir Diary*, entry dated October 6, 1890

in the roof garden after nightfall to while away their time talking and singing and discussing literature, with Kadambari Devi attending to their needs and serving them snacks and drinks. With her sudden death in 1884, this period of gaiety ended and Jyotirindranath shifted to another apartment of the house.

Tagore, thereupon, took possession of the suite and started living there with his family. In fact, all his five children were born there.* The roof garden again prospered under the care of Mrinalini Devi. The customary sitting on the roof was revived and the duty of playing the role of the hostess also fell upon her. She would take delight in preparing the dishes herself to serve them to her guests.**

This placid contented life of a house-holder, however, was changed by a decision taken by the head of the family very probably in the year 1889.

The family estates in North Bengal were the principal source of income for the families of Debendranath and his deceased brother Girindranath. As he himself was preoccupied with his life of piety away from home, Debendranath needed the services of a competent person to look after the family estates. He found a good administrator in the person of his eldest son-in-law, Saradaprasad Ganguly. But, Saradaprasad died in 1883 and there arose the problem of finding a worthy successor. Debendranath decided to place his youngest son Rabindranath in charge of these estates.

There is no clear evidence as to the exact point of time at which Tagore took over the charge of managing the family estates. The inspection book of the local school at Sahajadpur which forms a part of the estates, contains a note of inspection in Tagore's own hand, bearing the date January 20, 1890. From this, it can be easily inferred that he had taken over charge at least in the previous year. This is further confirmed by the fact that he wrote his drama *Visarjan* in 1889 while staying at Sahajadpur.

*Sarala Devi Choudhuri, *Jibaner Jhara Pata*, **Rathindranath Tagore, *On the Edges of Time*, Disconnected Memories

Of the four Zamindari estates which constituted the family property, one was located in Cuttack, and the rest in North Bengal. These three were : (1) Sahajadpur tehsil in Pabna Collectorate with headquarters at Sahajadpur, (2) Birahimpur tehsil in Nadia Collectorate with headquarters at Shelidah, and (3) Kaligram tehsil in Rajshahi Collectorate with headquarters at Patisar.

The headquarters of these three estates in North Bengal were located at Shelidah. It is situated on the south bank of the Ganges at a point which faces Pabna on the opposite bank and is close to the principal town of the sub-division, Kushtia, being separated only by a stretch of cultivated lands and the river Gorai. The office of the tehsil at Sahajadpur was situated on the bank of the canal which links up with the Atrai, a tributary of the Jamuna, joining the Ganges at its lower reaches. Patisar, the headquarter of Kaligram tehsil, is situated on the bank of a minor river named Nagar which again is a tributary of Atrai. At each of the headquarters at Patisar and Sahajadpur, there was a bungalow for inspecting officers to camp during inspection. The main office at Shelidah had been provided with a spacious two-storeyed bungalow as the permanent residence of the administrative head of the estates.

Tagore, when placed in charge of the management of these estates, took his residence in the two-storeyed bungalow at Shelidah. When circumstances so demanded, he would pay visits to the branches at Sahajadpur and Patisar. The big rivers—the Padma, which is the name of the Ganges as known by in this part of the country, and the Jamuna—provided the highways and the tributary rivers gave access to the branch offices. A house-boat was the obvious choice for transport. Tagore had his own house boat which he named Padma.

During this period, his life fell into a new pattern. While the major part of his time would be spent in business in his estates he would come over to his family residence at Jorasanko at regular intervals. During his absence from home, his pen would work on ceaselessly as the rural environment was not only congenial but the loneliness also acted as an incentive. During his stay in Calcutta, Tagore would enjoy respite and utilise these visits to look after the publication of his writings.

It was at this time that a new cultural club was established in the family house at the instance of his nephews led by Balendranath and Sudhindranath among others and under a strange inspiration it was named *Kham Kheyali Sabha*, an expression which is difficult to translate into English; a club ruled by whims perhaps makes a near approach. By common consent, Rabindranath became the patron of this cultural organisation. During his short stays in Calcutta, it would come to life when literary sittings, musical soirees and even theatrical performances would be arranged for, while during his absence in the estates, it would revert to inactivity. It behaved, therefore, very much like the Cepheid Variables.

In the literary sittings, Tagore would often give his first readings of his latest writings. On one occasion, the members decided to stage a drama but they failed to select a suitable play for the purpose. Tagore came to their rescue and promised to write out a drama and bring it with him on his next visit. That was how the drama *Visarjan* which is based on his novel *Rajarshi* came to be written. The literary sittings of this club attracted distinguished citizens of Calcutta. It would include men of the stature of Jagadish Chandra Bose, the scientist, Chittaranjan Das, the political leader, Pramatha Choudhury, Atul Prasad Sen, the composer, to name only a few. The cultural sittings used to be preceded by a sumptuous feeding, Tagore as the patron of the club meeting the expenses. The task of preparing the food to be served naturally fell on his wife Mrinalini Devi who would serve a new set of dishes for each occasion.*

The activities of this interesting club continued vigorously till 1897 after which it died out. The reason is not far to seek. In that year, Tagore removed his family to Shelidah and his frequent visits to Calcutta stopped. As it drew its sustenance from him principally, his absence cut it off from its life giving sap, thus dooming it to its death.

The long stay in North Bengal carried significance in more than one way. For one thing, his literary activities were stimulated by

*Rathindranath Tagore, *On the Edges of Time*, Kham Kheyali Sabha

the impact of the changed surroundings on his mind. Secondly, it gave a new turn to his literary activities by driving them to new channels. Lastly, by bringing him in contact with the underprivileged classes of society in rural areas, it built up in his mind an urge for welfare activities which in later life, inspired him to interest himself in activities promoting rural reconstruction.

His tours on boat along rivers presented to his view nature in all her facets. While the constantly shifting scene on the bank fed his eyes and sustained his interest, the hamlets dotted on it and the simple village folk attending to their domestic chores charmed his heart. His halts at different places also brought him in close contact with the common village folk like the farmers, the artisans and the employees of his estates as well as the local dignitaries like the village postmaster, the Munsiff posted to a remote thana headquarters and the Naeb of the Zamindars.

To add to his delight, the play of the seasons lent variety to the rural scenes. The following quotation in translation from his reminiscences will show what strong attraction he felt for nature in her different moods:

“Winter or summer or the rainy season made no difference to me; many a time have I gone out on the Padma throughout the year, defying the scorching heat of the summer sun and the torrential rain of the monsoon. On the distant bank appeared shady villages bedecked in green foliage, and on the near bank was the desolate expanse of the stretch of pale sands, while on the moving current of the Padma in between, the heavenly painter was painting variegated shifting scenes with the brush of light and shadow.”*

This simultaneous contact with nature and the unsophisticated village folk not only stirred Tagore’s imagination but also directed his writings to a new course. It appears that the hold of poetry which he considered to be his first love, slackened in consequence, to make room for a newcomer—short stories. Not that he stopped writing poems altogether, but they received less attention from him than his new love. Thus, we find that during this long period of twelve years, his pen produced only five books of poems which

*Preface to *Sonar Tari*

included *Sonar Tari* and *Chitra*. On the other hand out of a total of ninety short stories which find place in his *Galpa Guchha* as many as fifty were written during this period. They included gems like *Postmaster*, *Kabuliwala*, *Kshudhita Pashan* and *Atithi*.

He also found little difficulty in keeping the family magazine fed with short stories. While the family literary magazine *Bharati* started in 1877, received its due share, a new family magazine named *Sadhana* started in 1891 by his nephew Sudhindranath, was also fed bountifully.

That it was the new experience he was subjected to which provided the raw materials for his stories will be confirmed from an extract in translation from his reminiscences:

“I would ply my boat from the Padma to the Icchamati which skirts the town of Pabna, then through the marshes of Baral, Hurosagar and Chalan and then along the Atrai, the Nagar and the Jamuna and the canal leading to Sahadpur. On both sides were townships with huts having corrugated iron sheet roofs, with boats crowded in the market place close by, with eroding banks and flourishing villages here and there. Groups of children led by a brahmin boy, assemblies of cowherd boys on village pastures and colonies of birds in holes on the high banks of the Padma overgrown with wild casuarina trees would present themselves to the view. I reaped the harvest of my stories from this unique experience gained in course of wanderings in the villages.”*

The scenic beauty of rural Bengal had its impact on his poetry too and it became a new subject for treatment in his poems. The specific charm of the poems of *Sonar Tart* is evidently derived from this source. The image of a boat plied by a mystic figure that haunts the last poem of this collection was evidently inspired by the long boat journeys on the Padma. It also appears that one entire book of verses named *Chaitali* was the gift of this land of beauty. It records the scenic beauty and petty village incidents in such meticulous details that they appear to take shape before the reader's eyes. Here we find descriptive poetry at its best. The contents of his poetry also took on a deeper tone and directed his mind to serious subjects.

**Prabasi*, Baisakh, 1344 issue

While in rural Bengal, Tagore became the subject of two different impulses. One attracted him to the life of isolation and created a yearning for spiritual union with God, which in the fullness of time gave birth to his concept of *Jivan Devata*. The other engendered in his mind a craving for promoting activities for the welfare of the underprivileged classes. This at a later phase inclined him to interest himself in educational and rural welfare activities.

When the outer physical charm of the rural environment began to wear out these contrary yearnings dominated his life. He compares them to twin stars in the firmament of his mind.*

These conflicting moods are quite discernible in the poems of *Chitra* written in 1896. He gave vent to his resentment on seeing the miserable existence of rural labourers by writing the stirring poem *Ebar Firao More* which finds place in *Chitra*. Here is an extract in translation :

“Then come away, poet, if you have vitality
 Bring that with you and distribute it.
 There is so much sorrow, so much pain;
 a world of misery faces you.
 There is so much poverty, empty, pitiable,
 closed in and dark.
 They need food, light, life, open air,
 strength, health, long life brightened by joy.
 And brave hearts. In the midst of this
 poverty, poet,
 For once bring from heaven above a
 feeling of self-reliance.”

As referred to earlier, Rabindranath moved his family to Shelidah in 1897, principally because of the problem of education of his children. Instead of the crowded house at Jorasanko, the family got a spacious bungalow to live in. Having no scope for contact with outsiders, the members of the family found themselves more closely drawn to one another. In fact, it presented Tagore with the opportunity for the first time to live in the bosom of his own family.

*Preface to *Chitra*

As no schools were available at Shelidah, he made arrangements for the education of his children at home. Moreover, he disliked school education for which he carried bitter memories. He appointed an Englishman named Lawrence for teaching English and gave him quarters in the outhouses of the bungalow. For teaching of Mathematics, he selected Jagadananda Roy, whose essays on scientific subjects had earlier attracted Tagore's attention and so had been employed in the estate establishment. Sibdhan Vidyarnaba was appointed to teach Sanskrit, while Tagore himself took the charge of teaching Bengali.*

Tagore took particular care to acquaint his children with the two great Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. He held the view that they are the best medium for transmitting all that is best in our tradition to young minds. He used to draw an analogy to the twin river system of the Ganges and the Jamuna which provide food to millions of people in the Gangetic plain. Similarly, he thought that these two epics provided spiritual food to the children of India. Good Bengali versions of these, the *Ramayana* of Krittibasa and the *Mahabharata* of Kasiram Das were available. They being too big for children, he was keen that abridged versions of the original epics should be made available.

He, therefore, encouraged his nephew Surendranath Tagore to write an abridged Bengali version of the *Mahabharata*. As regards the *Ramayana*, he assigned the task to his wife Mrinalini Devi. But she was overtaken by the cruel hand of death before she could complete it.**

Of her own initiative, Mrinalini Devi took some measures which appear both unorthodox and original. She decided to give leave to the servants of the family on Sundays and entrusted their tasks to her children. While the servants could enjoy rest, the children got an opportunity for getting trained in different chores.

His self-banishment to the wilderness of Shelidah could not however, save Tagore's self-imposed seclusion. His personal charms

*Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, *Rabindra Jivani*

**Rathindranath Tagore, *On the Edges of Time*, At Shelidah

and virtuosity started attracting visitors from outside. Jagadish Chandra Bose, the scientist, would come from Calcutta, Akshay Kumar Maitreya, the historian, would come from Rajsahi and even his famous critic, Dwijendralal Roy, who was then posted at Kushtia as the Sub-Divisional Officer, would not hesitate to accept his hospitality. Others included his boyhood friend Loken Palit and Jagadindranath Ray, the Zamindar of Natore. Their visits would provide occasion for literary and cultural sittings at Shelidah. Occasional visits by Amala Das, sister of Chittaranjan Das, would add to the charm of such sittings as she used to provide lavish feast of songs.*

Four years glided by in this manner with the members enjoying the blessings of a united family life in an idyllic setting. But two factors served to break this spell. First, Tagore's eldest son, Rathindranath was approaching the age when regular school education in company with fellow students was necessary for him. Secondly, the craving in his mind for self-expression through disinterested service intensified and took on the form of an urge for some service to society.** These two together gave rise to the idea of founding an institution for imparting education to children in line with the national ideals. Thus Tagore took the momentous decision to found a residential school at Santiniketan, where his father had built up a small settlement.

The family shifted to Santiniketan in December, 1901 where the Brahmacharyya Ashram was opened with five students including Rathindranath. Soon however, Tagore had to face the problem of financing the school. The property in Santiniketan used to enjoy an annual income of Rs. 1,800 being the proceeds of specific rentbearing landed properties. This was hardly sufficient to meet the mounting expenditure. So, a chunk of the personal allowance given to him by his father had to be directed to meet the expenses of the school. Even that did not suffice. So Tagore was forced to sell a house he had acquired at Puri from his own personal income to raise the necessary funds. It appears that Mrinalini Devi was

*Rathindranath Tagore, *On the Edges of Time*, At Shelidah, ***The Religion of Man*, The Teacher

also compelled to sell some of her ornaments to supplement the resources.

The family life at Santiniketan did not however, continue for long. During the rainy season, Mrinalini Devi took ill at Santiniketan and the disease could not be cured by local doctors. So she was removed to the family house of Jorasanko for better medical attention. After a protracted illness patiently borne, Mrinalini Devi expired on November 23, 1902, corresponding to Agrahayan 7, 1309 of the Bengali calendar.

It is said that on the day of her death, Tagore spent the entire night walking alone on the roof of his house, so deep was the shock of her death. Except for this, however, there was no outward manifestation of his grief. Not that he did not feel the pangs of sorrow, but he knew how to hide his personal grief from others' eyes. This was prompted by a sense that it was improper to inflict others with grief that is exclusively one's own. The following lines from one of his poems in translation spell out his attitude to this subject:

“On a day of sorrow I ask my pen
not to put me to shame,
not to place before the eyes of others
what is exclusively my own.
Do not hide your face in darkness,
do not bolt your door.”*

The grief that flooded his heart on this occasion however, found expression in secret in a series of poems written at a stretch within two months of his wife's death. Soon after, they were published in the form of a book titled *Smaran*. The book was not directly dedicated to Mrinalini Devi but on the page earmarked for dedication, it simply quoted the date of her death.

This book contributed to Bengali literature one of the best collections of poems dealing with the tragedy of death of a beloved, and stands comparison with other similar books in world literature. One of its poems has been translated into English by the poet

*Punascha, Viswashok

himself and given a place in his English *Gitanjali*. The poem gives a vivid picture of the agony of his heart when he misses her in the house and seeks consolation by dipping his emptied life in the ocean of eternity.*

**Gitanjali*, 87, "In desperate hope I go and search"

VII

EXPERIMENT IN EDUCATION

BORN IN an atmosphere of extreme piety, built up at home by a pious father, Tagore was initiated into a life of religion from early age. His temperament which was by nature religious, also helped him to adapt himself to it. So his life was divided between his two interests, literary pursuit and a life of piety. During the latter part of his life at Shelidah, his mind came to be disturbed by deeper questions. His own idea of religion slowly started asserting itself in his mind. Although he had not yet discovered his own religion, he vaguely felt the need for assigning a place for man in his religion. In other words, the seeds of humanistic thoughts started sprouting in his mind. This induced in him an urge for breaking the seclusion built up round him by his literary activities on the one hand and his life of piety on the other. He felt the need for undertaking some kind of welfare activity.

“The solitary enjoyment of the infinite in meditation,” he observes, “no longer satisfied me, and the texts which I used for my silent worship, lost their inspiration without my knowing it.”* He also observes that he felt a compelling desire to come out of the seclusion of his literary career.

With the ground thus prepared for a new turn for his career, Tagore only needed some occasion to spur him to a decision. This occasion presented itself in the form of the problem of education of his eldest son Rathindranath. He had already completed thirteen years of age. Education at home under supervision of private tutors did not quite meet his needs. It was high time that he was admitted to some school where he could continue his studies in company of other students.

**Religion of Man, The Teacher*

In ordinary circumstances, the problem could have been solved by transferring him to the care of his uncles in Calcutta where he could have been admitted to a good school. Tagore, however, had a strong prejudice against such school education. The following quotation in translation from his observation gives a peep into his idea:

“During my boyhood, I became subjected to bitter suffering under the system of school education. This system inflicted such pain on me and hurt me so much that I carried its memory even when I grew up. For, under this system, the child is separated from the bosom of nature and society and placed in the factory that goes by the name of school. The irritation of its abnormal environment subjects the child’s mind to daily torture.”*

No wonder, he was reluctant to inflict this experience on his son. Hence the decision to build up a school which will be shaped according to his own ideas, to make it a more effective instrument of education and convert education into an enjoyable experience. This is how the poet was dragged down from the ivory tower of his poetry to take upon himself the role of a teacher.

Santiniketan became the obvious choice as the site for this institution. His father had already built up a settlement there. The trust deed executed by the Maharshi in 1887 also laid down a development programme for this place which included the establishment of a library and a school. It also enjoined that steps should be taken to organise an annual fair to commemorate the day on which Maharshi got initiated into the Brahmo faith. No steps had thus far been taken to give shape to these ideas. When Tagore’s own proposal was stated to his father, the latter readily gave it his blessings.

It may not be out of place to mention here that the sweet memories Tagore carried of his first visit to this place in his boyhood in company of his father must have also influenced his decision. It provided him with the first exhilarating experience of real contact with nature. The rugged beauty of these unfertile lands

**Viswa-Bharati*

studded with clusters of Palmyras had charmed his heart as nothing did before.

Tagore also had profound respect for the old forest settlements of India called *tapovanas*. Of the vivid descriptions of these settlements in Sanskrit literary works, his attention was particularly attracted to the descriptions in the *Ramayana*, the *Kadambari* of Bana and in the works of Kalidasa. Kalidasa's *Raghuvansam* starts with a charming description of the forest settlements of Vasista. Two entire acts of his drama *Abhijnana Sakuntalam* have for their location the *tapovana* of Kanva, the foster father of the heroine.* Tagore thought that Kalidasa's extreme fondness for scenes depicting these forest settlements indicated a deep yearning of his heart engendered by his banishment to the court of his royal patron from the immediate presence of the eternal.

He correctly read that these forest dwellings of the patriarchal community of ancient India were not merely a colony of people with primitive culture and mind. His appreciation of the true character of these settlements finds eloquent expression in the following quotation from his observations: "They were seekers after truth for the sake of which they lived in an atmosphere of purity but not Puritanism, of the simple life but not the life of self-mortification."** What roused his admiration was the fact that they never practised "a philosophy of renunciation of a negative character, but a realisation completely comprehensive."***

Having himself felt the torture of such a spiritual banishment like Kalidasa, he wanted to build for himself a settlement after the model of the ancient *Tapovanas*. Evidently, life in the city repelled him.

With the site for the new institution settled, the question arose as to what form it should take. Tagore expected that it should be an institution with a distinction. He wanted a modified method of teaching although he had also in view expansion of the scope of

*His article *Tapovana*,

***Religion of Man*, The Teacher,

***Ibid

education. For example, he was very much conscious of the fact that the system of education obtaining in schools included no provision for building up moral character, although missionary schools had some arrangements for religious teaching. He wanted that the method of teaching should be so shaped that teaching became an enjoyable and interesting experience for the pupil. He gave his best thoughts to the subject and felt that it should be marked out by the following features:

He wanted the institution to be residential in character so that close contact between the teacher and the pupil is assured, helping the growth of a personal relationship between them. He was wholly in favour of reviving the ancient system of education obtaining in India where the pupil used to leave his parental home and stay under the protection of his teacher's family. He, therefore, also insisted that the teacher should live in the campus of the institution not alone, but with his family. The students, of course, could not be housed with the teacher as there were practical difficulties and had to be put up in hostels.*

The ancient system provided that during his period of education the student should practise *Brahmacharyya*, which in that context meant living a life of discipline. Tagore desired that the practice should also be revived in his school. Recording his appreciation of this system he says: "Our teachers, therefore, keeping in mind the goal of this programme, did not, in life's first stage of education, prescribe merely the learning of books or things, but *Brahmacharyya*, the living in discipline, whereby both enjoyment and renunciation would come with equal ease to the strengthened character."**

The above quotation will show that Tagore did not prescribe this course for love of asceticism. He did not like the austerity of asceticism for its own sake for he considered this to be a purely negative attitude. The cultivator does not plough his field to leave it fallow, he argued, but to raise crops. Similarly, practice of

**Shiksha Samasya*

***Religion of Man*, The Four Stages of Life

Brahmacharyya in the first stage of life was recommended for the purpose of instilling a sense of discipline in the student so that the ground is prepared for education proper.

It appears that in his thought, discipline and residential system of education were complementary and hence should go together. He felt that moral education could not be effectively imparted through lectures delivered in class-rooms or counsel communicated to the student. It has to be imbibed from the environment. It is rather the conduct of the teacher and the moral quality of his actions which more effectively shape the character of the student.

Then again, he felt, that during the formative stage of life, the student should not be exposed to the buffeting of ordinary life. There is the chance that the conduct of the people of inferior character may adversely affect young minds and rouse in them improper desires prematurely.* Like a delicate plant which needs protection against the ravages of grazing animals, they need to be isolated from the contact of such men. A course of discipline would also help to build up within them a system of inner control to face exposure in later life to the improper acts of others.

This again is in conformity with the ideals accepted in the ancient educational system of our country. Thus the *Taittiriya Upanishad* enjoins that the teacher should not only advise on sound conduct, but should also set an example through his own action. It is also said that the pupil should imitate only such conduct of the teacher as is good. The very expression *Acharyya*, the appellation given to the Teacher, means a person whose conduct is unexceptionable.

Tagore was aware that his insistence that the institution should have a rural setting as in the ancient forest settlements was looked down upon by educationists used to modern way of thinking. They labelled it as mysticism, and an idea dictated not so much by sound reason as by sentiment.* He, however, honestly believed that his proposition was based on solid reason. He argued that life under the open sky in the bosom of nature was beneficial both to the

**Shiksha samasya*

body and the mind of the growing child. But there is more than that in it. Urban life is a new development in the history of man; it evolved to meet his practical needs. Its utter unconcern for values other than economic ones foster in it such an artificial atmosphere that people who live there become alienated from nature and miss its healing touch. At least for a growing child, in his opinion, the atmosphere was definitely hostile and hampered his spiritual growth. a rural setting was, therefore, more essential than equipments like benches and black boards.**

He also accepted as a guiding principle that the students living in the *Ashram* should be encouraged to participate in the running of the institution. They might, for example, be assigned the task of keeping the campus clean and setting up gardens, and even attending to various chores in running the residential hostel. This not only provides an outlet for their surplus energy, but also helps to shape their character in various ways. In their effort to build a healthy and beautiful atmosphere in the campus, they feel the joy of participation in creative efforts as also develop an aesthetic sense. Duties of running the hostel make them feel and develop a sense of belonging; not just a sense of responsibility, but a liking for co-operative efforts to serve the institution.

Here again Tagore appears to have been influenced by the example of the ancient forest settlements. Referring to a description of a *tapovana* in the Sanskrit prose-romance, *Kadambari*, which profoundly impressed him, he says: “Evening is descending on the hermitage like the tawny cattle returning to the cowshed. This reminds me that the grazing of cattle, milking them, collection of fuel for the sacrificial fire, looking after guests, setting up the platform for the sacrificial fire form part of the daily routine of the boys and girls of the hermitage. Through such activities their life becomes deeply involved with the corporate life of the hermitage. The people of the hermitage thus build up with their own hands hourly a pervading feeling of friendliness through co-operative actions. I want a revival in our *Ashram* of such continuously vigorous co-operative activities.”*

**Ashram Siksha*

Tagore also desired that classes should be held in the open air under the trees. In this matter, he neither held any rigid ideas, nor was dogmatic that the students should never sit on benches in class rooms. He favoured it in a limited way for two reasons. First, he thought that such open-air classes promote deeper contact with nature and impart to education a character of informality which makes it enjoyable. He recommended that in favourable seasons classes should be held in the open air under shady trees. The teacher may even give his lessons while strolling under the tree along with the pupils. Music classes and narrating of tales from the Puranas can be held in the evenings under the canopy of the sky, while astronomy can be studied very well at night with the stars and the constellations spread out before the eyes on the vast firmament above. He evidently was guided by his own experience in his early age when he used to receive such lessons from his father during his short sojourn in the Himalayas.

It appears that there was another consideration which prompted him to recommend classes in the open air. It makes education cheaper. He argued that such demand for equipments like chairs and tables and benches was more prompted by a blind craze for the imitation of Western ways of living than by real needs.* Being a poor country, we cannot also afford such expenses. We enjoy a moderate climate and, therefore, can afford to sit on the ground. Particularly in summer, open-air classes are rather more enjoyable than indoor classes.

The Brahmacharyya Ashram was established in Santiniketan on December 22, 1901 with a batch of five students including the poet's son Rathindranath. The first of the teachers to join the institution were Rewachand, a Sindhi scholar and Sibdhan Vidyarnab who used to teach Sanskrit to Rathindranath at Shelidah as a private tutor. But the man who became the main prop of the institution was a colourful personality who had assumed the name Brahmabandhab Upadhyay. His original name was Bhabani Charan Banerjee. In his early youth, he became attracted to Keshab Chandra Sen but afterwards drifted to Christianity and became a Roman

**Shiksha Samasya*

Catholic Christian. Apart from having a vivacious personality, he entertained highly patriotic feelings and had a great regard for our ancient heritage. He volunteered to run the institution. No wonder, Tagore felt that he owed a deep debt of gratitude to him.*

Upadhyay became attracted to Tagore through his book of verse entitled *Naivedya* published just before the new school was founded. It is a collection of verses which introduced new traits to his poetry. The poems, mostly written in the form of sonnets, were devoted to serious subjects, the main points of interest being God, patriotic feelings towards India and a profound feeling of admiration for India's ancient institutions and culture. Philosophical subjects also found a place including arguments against the Advaita Vedanta of Samkara. It is the new spirit of these poems which attracted the attention of Upadhyay. In fact, he published an appreciative review of the book in the journal, *Twentieth Century* edited by himself.

Upadhyay looked after the Brahmacharyya Ashram with enthusiasm and efficiency for sometime. It was he who introduced the practice of referring to Tagore as Gurudev which appellation gained such wide currency that ever since, he has been known as Gurudev to the students of Santiniketan.** Mahatma Gandhi also preferred to address Tagore by this appellation.

Upadhyay did not, however, stay long at Santiniketan. His urge for involving himself in active politics asserted itself so strongly that he had to give up his assignment at Santiniketan.

Soon, the institution drew a few more talented and idealistic young men who offered their services at considerable personal sacrifice. One of them was Ajit Kumar Chakravarty who was well grounded in English literature and Philosophy. He subsequently proved to be an asset to the institution not only for his success as a teacher but as a dependable commentator on Tagore's writings.

Through Ajit Chakravarty was introduced to Tagore another talented young man named Satish Chandra Ray. He came of a very

**Ashramer Rup O Vikas*, 3

**Ajit Kumar Chakravarty, *Brahmavidyalaya*

poor family and had just matured for the B.A. degree examination. His family expected him to pass it, so that he could get a job and render financial assistance to the family. On hearing about his antecedents, Tagore was at first reluctant to accept his offer. Imbued with a keen desire to serve the institution, Satish Chandra Ray insisted on his acceptance and Tagore had to yield. With his deep grounding in English literature, he proved another asset. Unfortunately, within three years, he fell a victim to an attack of smallpox.*

The Poet's friend Mohit Chandra Sen responded to his request to take over the work of running the institution. His affection and respect for Tagore was so great that he did not hesitate to give up a post of position in higher education carrying good pay to join the school at Santiniketan. Under his care and attention, the institution prospered and the roll strength increased. Unfortunately, he fell seriously ill, and after recovery decided to leave the institution. Before his departure, however, he donated one thousand rupees to the school, being his entire earning as an examiner.**

Among the other notable assets to this new institution was Jagadananda Roy. His lucid essays on scientific subjects in the family magazine of Tagores called *Sadhna* attracted the poet's attention. Tagore had given him a post in the head office of the estate at Shelidah. Later, he was transferred to Santiniketan where he distinguished himself both as a teacher and a writer of popular scientific books.

* Ajit Kumar Chakravarty, *Brahmavidyalaya*,

***Ashramer Rup O Vikas*, 2

VIII

TRAVAIL AND DISTRACTION

It is said that misfortune never comes singly. In the case of Tagore, it came first with the death of his beloved wife and in its trail created other problems. Mrinalini Devi had left five children, two sons and three daughters. The eldest child and daughter, Madhurilata, had been married at the insistence of Mrinalini Devi just before they had shifted to Santiniketan. The second child was Rathindranath. The third child Renuka, a daughter, was only twelve years of age when her mother died. She had also been married off before the family settled in Santiniketan. But her husband having gone away to the United States for higher education, she stayed on with her parents. Meera, the fourth child and youngest daughter, was only ten years old, while the youngest child Somindra, a son, was two years her junior. The additional duties of looking after these three younger children devolved on him.

Soon after, the country was involved in a violent political upheaval and he could not help throwing himself in the forefront of the political movement that followed. He involved himself actively in political work for a considerable length of time at this period of his life. But, to his disillusionment, he found that the movement was being directed by leaders who held sharply different views from him and who wanted to direct it to what he considered wrong lines. He parted company with them ultimately and in frustration sought refuge again in educational and literary activities.

His second daughter Renuka had contracted tuberculosis and she needed all his time and attention. The only treatment recommended in those days when antibiotics had not been discovered was residence at a health station. Accordingly, Tagore decided to take her to Hazaribagh. Before doing so, he left the charge of his two youngest children with his second sister-in-law, Jnanadanandini Devi. The stay at Hazaribagh, however, did not

appear to produce any improvement in the condition of Renuka. So the father decided to remove her to Almora in the central Himalayas where the higher altitude was expected to give better results.

It was Tagore's enforced isolation here and the need for suitable entertainment for his ailing child that provided the incentive for him to try his hand on a new field of poetry; composing verses for children. In his earlier days, he had written a few poems for children to feed the children's magazine started in the family. When, however, it was wound up after a short life of three years, he gave up writing such poems. Now again, children's verses came in profusion. The central figure of these poems was a boy through whose eyes Tagore tried to see his small but interesting world consisting of his parents, sister and brother. The poems written at this stage were subsequently collected and published under the title *Shishu*. They have served to enrich Bengali literature as one of the finest collections of children's verses.

After a stay of about three months, Renuka's condition indicated some improvement and so she was brought back to the family house at Jorasanko. Unfortunately, a short time after, her condition suddenly deteriorated and she died in September 1903.

Closely following the second bereavement within ten months of his wife's death, in the end of 1904, Tagore's father who was 87 then, became seriously ill. The illness continued for sometime and he died in January 1905. Apart from the mental anguish it caused, the death of his father involved the family in many new problems which arise on the death of the head of a family.

Maharshi had executed a will before his death which provided for the sharing of his house at Jorasanko among Dwijendranath, Rabindranath and the sons of the deceased Hemendranath. Other members of the family were given the right to live in the house for life. As regards the rent-bearing estates, he divided the properties situated in North Bengal between Dwijendranath, Satyendranath, and Rabindranath. The properties in the Cuttack district of Orissa were made over to the three sons of Hemendranath. The rent-bearing properties willed over to Tagore used to fetch an annual

income of about Rs. 36,000. Additionally, the will contained provision for the maintenance of other dependent members of the family and the maintenance of the property at Santiniketan and the prayer hall attached to the ancestral house at Jorasanko.*

The execution of the will and the adjustments to be effected in consequence, engaged the attention of the members of the family for a considerable time. As one of the executors and a responsible member of the family, Tagore had to pay considerable attention to this matter to smooth out things for the other executors, that is, his nephews Deependranath and Surendranath.

It appears that fate decreed that Tagore should be subjected to more cruel treatment by the hand of death. His youngest son Somindra who was studying in the school attached to the Ashram at Santiniketan accompanied his class fellow Sarojendra to his uncle's house at Monghyr to spend the Puja holidays of 1907. He had an attack of cholera during his short stay there. As the illness took a serious turn, Tagore was hastily summoned to his ailing son's bedside by a telegraphic message. Unfortunately, medical treatment could not save the boy's life and Tagore lost him in November 1907.

Thus, within a span of five years, Tagore suffered bereavement four times, losing one by one his nearest and dearest ones. An ordinary person would have wilted under such terrific blows received from the hand of fate. It became possible for him to bear this terrible suffering with equanimity, because he had his inner source of strength. His implicit faith in God's intentions which fortified his spirit of resignation, made it possible for him to bear his sorrow with poise. This mood is very well reflected in one of his songs which begins thus:

“If the dark night of sorrow can make thy benign light glow
Let it be so.
If death can bring near thy kingdom of bliss
Let it be so”**

Though he bore these cruel blows of fate manfully and his conduct hardly reflected them, the death of his youngest son

*Will of Debendranath Tagore dated September 8, 1899,

***Geetabitan*, No. 313

wounded his sensitive heart deeply and he had to take special pains to get over it. After the bereavement, he went to Santiniketan to make temporary arrangements for its administration and left for Shelidah for a long stay. This time he also did not attend the annual Pous Mela at Santiniketan. After a long stay of five months at Shelidah, he found the mental strength to resume his normal life at Santiniketan.

To add to the complexity of this period of travail in Tagore's life, the political situation also deteriorated to a degree never seen since the British Government itself assumed power in India after the so-called Sepoy Mutiny. Certain calculated actions taken at the initiative of the then Governor General and Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, triggered off this turmoil. The background facts are these:

The British Government expanded its empire in India with its headquarters in Calcutta. By this accident of history, the Bengalis felt the impact of Western culture, which provided the shock treatment necessary for awakening our old, devitalised, moribund culture. This initiated a process of transition which through the blending of the two cultures gave birth, in due course of time, to the new culture of modern India. In such a blending, the good things of the old culture were retained, and the technology and scientific outlook, which engenders a faith in the capacity of man to better his condition materially through his own efforts, were borrowed.

During this stage of transition, a galaxy of distinguished Bengalis functioned as the spearhead of progressive movements in different fields. The objective was to clear the debris of decay in the old culture first and then lead it on to the path of progress and rejuvenation. Rammohun Roy who was the pioneer in many fields, interested himself particularly in social reform and the new religious movement. This movement gave birth to a new religious practice based on monotheism which became more acceptable to the educated Indian youth of those days than their religion in its orthodox form.

Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar as a worthy successor took up the cause of the amelioration of the condition of women in Indian

society. While Rammohun was instrumental in persuading Lord Bentinck to abolish the custom of *sati*, he got a law passed validating the remarriage of Hindu widows. He also took vigorous steps for the spread of education among women. No less important was his contribution to literature. He evolved a vigorous and elegant prose style in Bengali.

Closely following his footsteps, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee engaged himself seriously in the task of developing the Bengali literature to which his contribution imparted a dignity. His patriotic novel *Ananda Math*, which visualised the birth of a new prosperous India at the end of the period of exploitation, thrilled the heart of its countless readers. It prepared the field for sowing the seeds of patriotism in Indian soil. Vivekananda's exhortations came close after this, urging his followers to undertake humanitarian work as a part of religious practice. The exhortation to take up such work' to ameliorate the condition of under-privileged classes by fighting ignorance, casteism and poverty, intensified this process of preparation.

With the ground thus made ready, Surendranath Banerjea started a vigorous political movement, the long-term objective of which was political freedom. He took an active part in building up the Indian National Congress which came into being in 1886. 'Through his English daily, the *Bengali*, he carried on ceaseless propaganda for intensifying the freedom movement.

The centre of all these progressive movements was Calcutta and these movements themselves were dominated by Bengalis who had become politically conscious. The developments in the political field set the alien Government worrying as it worked against their imperialistic interest. So, under the advice of Lord Curzon, the Government decided to partition Bengal. Evidently, the idea was that by dividing up the Bengali people, a serious blow could be dealt to the political movement led by them. Bengal was then a big province comprising Bihar, Orissa, and Bengal proper. On partition, West Bengal, together with Bihar and Orissa, formed one province and North Bengal, East Bengal and Assam together constituted the other province. The result was that the Bengalis

were divided into two groups, one predominantly Hindu and the other, to be precise that in the eastern part, predominantly Muslim, the two groups being placed under separate administrative charges. It would not be wrong to conclude that this was calculated to develop a spirit of separatism between the two Bengali communities.

The political thinkers of those days led by Surendranath Banerjea and Bipin Chandra Pal, amongst others, had no difficulty in guessing the motive behind partition of Bengal. They decided to fight the partition in all possible ways with the ultimate objective of bringing about a reunification of the two Bengals. The date from which the partition was to take effect was October 16, 1905. They decided to launch their anti-partition movement on the same date. The movement had two aspects. One aspect was the adoption of the programme of agitation through meetings, processions and boycott of British goods. The other was work relating to the emotional integration of the Bengalis.

Having a sensitive heart and finely developed patriotic feelings Tagore could not resist the impulse to throw himself into this movement. Even his domestic worries and bereavements proved no deterrent. Tagore interested himself in the second part of the movement; promoting emotional integration of the Bengalis. His poetic mind found a new source of inspiration in this theme and from his gifted pen flowed out exquisite songs breathing patriotic sentiments, pleading for the unification of the hearts of the Bengalis. The large number of poems he wrote on this theme proved to be the best collection of patriotic songs in Bengali. A few of them became favourites of Mahatma Gandhi in later times, and he used to sing them in his prayer meetings as a regular feature.

Tagore drew up a programme for the day earmarked for partition which carried such intense sentimental appeal that it became the annual ritual for the Bengalis and even to this day survives to some degree. The programme recommended that the day of partition should be observed as a day of mourning by the Bengalis and so, there should be no cooking in Bengali houses. It was enjoined that every patriotic Bengali should take bath in the Bhagirathi first thing in the morning that day, and then tie *rakhis* (silk bands) on

the wrist of fellow Bengalis. This was to signify that persons who under God's dispensation had been born as brothers and sisters could not be separated from one another by the hostile act of an alien political power. For this occasion, Tagore composed a special song which ended with the refrain: "let all the brothers and sisters of every Bengali home be united in heart, Oh God".

We have an interesting account of the programme executed by Tagore himself and the party led by him. It has been recorded by his gifted nephew, Abanindranath, the famous painter. This account throws some light on some undiscovered aspects of Tagore's character.

Tagore led his party from his ancestral home to the river nearby and after taking their bath, they went in procession along the city streets singing the song specially composed for the occasion by Tagore, tying *rakhis* on the wrist of every Bengali they met on the way. The streets along which the procession moved were filled with crowds on both sides several rows thick. From the house-tops and verandahs opening to the road, women blew conch-shells and showered puffed rice on the processionists to indicate their sympathy to their cause.

Tagore became so very enthusiastic in tying silk bands on the wrists of people that he decided even to carry it to a point of excess. On the main road leading to his residence stood a mosque further south. He decided to lead his procession there and tie *rakhis* on the wrists of the *maulavis* to be found there. Among others, he was accompanied in the procession by his nephews Abanindranath and Surendranath, son of Satyendranath. In this move, Abanindranath, however, read danger. He apprehended that Tagore's gesture might not be appreciated by the people in the mosque who might take offence and start a row. Considering, therefore, escape to be the better part of valour, he withdrew from the procession. But Tagore did enter the mosque and tie silk bands on the people he found there. None took offence and the procession ended peacefully.*

*Abanindranath—*Gharwa*

When the movement was launched, the Government was determined to restrict it as much as possible. With this end in view, a circular order was issued to all educational institutions prohibiting participation by students in the movement. The leaders of the movement organised a public meeting to voice their protest against the Government order. They also decided to take steps to keep educational institutions outside the control of Government. Efforts to give effect to this decision led to very significant developments. As a first step it was decided to establish the National Council of Education. Donations came in adequately to make it possible to inaugurate the Council on August 15, 1906. Sri Aurobindo gave up his assignment at Baroda to join the new institution as its first Principal. It is the same institution which later grew into the Jadavpur University and has specialised in engineering and technology after Independence.

Being in the forefront of the movement, Tagore also became associated with this institution. He had a hand in shaping its educational policy and preparing a course of study for it. He was also entrusted with the task of running the Bengali language and literature department of the institution.*

But Tagore's association with the anti-partition movement did not continue for long. He soon found that he had come to parting of the ways with his associates. The movement was soon directed to methods like boycott of schools, which, according to Tagore, amounted to a negative sacrifice leading to non-education. The programme of boycott of British goods again, to his mind, was a negative action. A programme for developing indigenous industries would have been a more positive one. Ultimately, he had to break away to resume his work as an educationist in the quiet atmosphere of Santiniketan.

Tagore himself gives an idea of his attitude to the reactions that follow any flagrant act of political injustice committed by the foreign rulers and the form of registering a protest. In a letter written by him to his friend C.F. Andrews, in 1920, he says:

*Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay *Rabindra Jivani*

“Swadeshi, swarajism, ordinarily produce intense excitement in the minds of my countrymen, because they carry in them some fervour of passion generated by the exclusiveness of their rage. It cannot be said that I am untouched by this heat and movement. But somehow, by my temperament as a poet, I am incapable of accepting these objects as final. They claim from us a great deal more than is their due. After a certain point is reached, I find myself obliged to separate myself from my own people with whom I have been working.”*

These introspective remarks also give a clue to the understanding of his conduct in later life. After the break away from political movement towards the end of the first decade of the current century, Tagore divided his time between his two interests, namely, literary activities and the educational institution at Santiniketan. He remained more or less untouched by the political current. However, shaken by the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and what followed it, he broke his silence and chose to record his protest. Let us recall the events that led up to it.

During the first World War, the British Government had made a declaration that they would restore political independence to India through a phased programme. When no indication became available of any tangible action towards giving effect to this declaration even after the termination of the War, the people became restive and were poised for launching a movement. Anticipating trouble, the Imperial Government introduced a bill in the Central Council, authorising Government to detain persons without trial which became notorious as the Rowlatt Bill. Mahatma Gandhi had in the meantime joined Indian politics and under his leadership, a strong movement was launched against the Act. Gandhiji fixed March 30, 1919 (later changed to April 6) as the day for a countrywide hartal to protest against the Act. It took on an intensified form in the Punjab following repressive measures adopted by the authorities. A meeting was organised at Amritsar on April 13, 1919, to protest against the repression and killings

*Rabindranath Tagore, *On the Edges of Time*, The Swadeshi Movement

in that city and elsewhere in the Punjab. At Jallianwala Bagh, an open space enclosed almost entirely by high walls and having an entrance through a narrow lane, thousands of unarmed people had gathered for the protest meeting. Under the spell of a horrid inspiration, a British General named Dyer barricaded the entry with armed soldiers and then started shooting at the people assembled there. Having no way of escape, the assembly was brutally mowed down by rifle fire. Those dead alone counted 379 persons and the wounded numbered several times this figure.

When the news of this massacre of the innocents reached him at Santiniketan, he was deeply shocked. Feeling the need for action, he came over to Calcutta. He decided to renounce the Knighthood conferred on him in 1916 by the King Emperor, to register his personal protest. The letter he wrote to the Viceroy on May 29, 1919, conveying this decision, has assumed a special significance for the high moral tone it set in condemning the atrocity, encouraged and connived at by British imperialism at its worst, and thereby, exposing its ugly features to the eyes of the world. Tagore said in the letter: "The enormity of the measures taken by the Government of the Punjab for quelling some local disturbances has, with a rude shock, revealed to our minds the helplessness of our position as British subjects in India. The disproportionate severity of the punishments inflicted upon the unfortunate people and the methods of carrying them out, we are convinced, are without parallel in the history of civilized Governments, barring some conspicuous exceptions, recent and remote. Considering that such treatment has been meted out to a population, disarmed and resourceless, by a power which has the most terribly efficient organisation for destruction of human lives, we must strongly assert that it can claim no political expediency, far less moral justification."

Asking the Viceroy to relieve him of his title of knighthood, he further said: "The time has come when badges of honour make our shame glaring in the incongruous context of humiliation, and I, for my part, wish to stand, shorn of all special distinctions by the side of those of my countrymen who, for their so-called

insignificance, are liable to suffer degradation not fit for human beings.”

Returning to the subject of Tagore’s withdrawal from political activity, the reason for his action may perhaps be found in his personal views about independence. As early as 1904, Tagore had given expression to his views in his theory, *Swadeshi Samaj*.

After a study of the country’s history, he noted that the cause of Indian culture and material welfare of the people remained unaffected following changes in political set-up or the invasion of a foreign power. According to him, this was due to the fact that the wielders of power were more interested in their own well-being and hence, did not at all pay attention to the welfare of the subjects, nor did they interfere with their culture. In consequence, the task of looking after the well-being of the people fell on the society which became, in the process, a second centre of power. It was this division of functions that enabled India to maintain without interruption a system of social welfare activities, and its culture in spite of political changes.

In contrast, the West had developed a system in which the state took over the welfare activities also, in addition to political functions. He was not in favour of this new system to be borrowed from the West and planted in our soil. He believed that we could promote our well-being under our old system despite the fact that a foreign power was ruling the country.*

Enthused over this theory of his own, Tagore took steps to publicise it in public meetings. He even went so far as to draw up a concrete scheme. The idea was that a central body of the *Samaj* should be set up with an elected leader, who should be called the *Samajpati*. Under his leadership, this organisation would take over such functions as education, agriculture, justice and public health, as well as indigenous industries. The schemes would be implemented by local agencies which should be set up by reviving the old village panchayats.**

**Atmasakti O Samabay*

***Atmasakti O Samabay*, Abastha 0 Byabastha

The programme drawn up by Tagore and circulated for opinion included items like education, health, handicrafts, trade, administration of justice, enforcement of proper social conduct, and even promotion of literature. Interestingly, it enjoined that Western dress and ways of life should be avoided and goods produced by the West should not be purchased. The programme was to be financed through charity as also through the levy of a charge for financing welfare work. Such system of levy is in practice in rural areas of Bengal and is known as *Iswarbritti*.

The programme was discussed in two public meetings. The first meeting was called on 7th Sravan 1311 B.S., corresponding to July 1906. This was presided over by Romesh Chunder Dutt and attended, among others, by Gurudas Banerjee, an eminent jurist. The second meeting, called seven days after, was presided over by Hirendranath Dutt, a distinguished philosopher and attended, among others, by Bipin Chandra Pal. These prominent citizens of Calcutta on the whole welcomed his idea without committing themselves to it.*

The dominant section of the leaders, however, held fundamentally different views. They believed that the welfare of the country could not be effectively attended to unless the political power was wrested from the alien rulers. Tagore held that real social and material independence was feasible even without political independence. It may be he was Utopian or it may be there was an element of wishful thinking in hoping that what had been possible in the past would be possible in the present age. Be that as it may, he found himself isolated.

It would be useful to record some of his important actions in the domestic sphere before we close this chapter. His eldest son Rathindranath had passed the Entrance examination and was to be sent out for higher education. By this time, Tagore had in his mind a programme for developing agriculture in our country through advanced methods. Tagore decided to send Rathindranath to Illinois University for taking the B.Sc. course in Agriculture

**Atmasakti O Samabay, Tagore's Works, Centenary Edition, Vol. II*

and he left for the States in April 1906. On his return home in 1909, after getting his degree, Tagore settled him in a farm at Shelidah. Next year, he got him married to a girl named Pratima Devi, who claimed her descent from the other branch of the Tagore family started by Dwarkanath's second son, Girindranath. Earlier, in 1907, Tagore had married off his youngest daughter Meera to a promising young man named Nagendranath Ganguly and sent him also for higher education in Agronomy to the United States.

IX

SPIRITUAL SELF-REALISATION

EARLY IN his life, Tagore had imbibed a feeling of piety from his father and brothers as the family used to be surcharged with an atmosphere of religion. The founder of a new religion in a monotheistic frame, his father, Maharshi Debendranath, took personal interest in seeing to it that his children became initiated into the spirit of the new faith. When living at home he would assemble the members of the family in their prayer hall and himself conduct the prayers rounding up the prayers with suitable sermons.

In due course Tagore developed a love for the religion founded by his father. He used to compose hymns to be sung during prayers and such contributions have been assigned an honourable place in the compilation of hymns brought out by his community. Charmed by a particular hymn, his father, on one occasion expressed his appreciation by paying Tagore handsome monetary reward.

But Tagore, at heart a non-conformist in the matter of religion, soon started losing interest in institutionalised religion as such. To his mind, the practices prescribed and ideas preached by such a form of religion were tailored for the average type and hence, hold down truth to its static minimum. They do not suit the extraordinary type who ventures to satisfy his sense of piety through independent exploration. Tagore could not, therefore, reconcile himself to his connections with his church as it hindered self-realisation and thus failed to give access to the living face of truth. He, therefore gave up those connections.*

Taking to the open path in his search for the religion after his heart, Tagore was guided more by his temperament and mental

**Religion of Man*, "The Man of My Heart"

makeup. To show him the way to his goal, he trusted his feelings more than his intellect. He says:

“The solitary enjoyment of the infinite in meditation no longer satisfied me, and the texts which I used for my silent worship lost their inspiration without my knowing it. I am sure I vaguely felt that my need was self-realisation.”*

The long history of Tagore’s religious experience and his quest for a suitable form of religious expression from early life presents an interesting study. His own religion evolved in his mind through a variety of experiences. These experiences are reflected in his writings, both poetry and essays, as well as in his speeches. These expressions trace continuously various phases of the growth of Tagore’s religious experiences to maturity.** Because of this characteristic, his works spring from a unity of inspiration; his quest for a form of union with the Infinite Being which pervades creation providing such unity. According to him, the quest is for the contact of the infinite in the finite which is man’s mind.

Tagore says that the search is for the discovery of a poet’s religion and neither that of an orthodox man of piety nor that of a theologian.*** The inspiration for spiritual self-realisation as also for his poetry, being the same what he discovered at the end of his life-long quest was truly a poet’s religion. This incidentally provides us with a unique case of the literary artist and the pious man in Tagore undertaking a joint search. What his heart felt in the pursuit of spiritual realisation was given expression through poetry by the artist in him. This close collaboration between his two lives, if one might say so, has been poetically described by Tagore as a life in wedlock where two different entities live in harmony and accord. The fact that these two parts of his life were tracing a parallel course remained for a long time undiscovered to Tagore himself. This period he refers to, again poetically, as a period of betrothal. He records:

“Its (his religion) touch comes to me through the same unseen and trackless channel as does the inspiration of my songs. My religious

**Religion of Man*, “The Teacher”

**“Preface”

***“The Vision”

life has followed the same mysterious line of growth as has my poetic life. Somehow they are wedded to each other, and though their betrothal had a long period of ceremony, it was kept a secret to me.”*

The fact that a common theme provided inspiration to both his religion and poetry imparts two rare qualities to the latter. First his poetry has a dynamic quality; has a history and has developed through different phases to maturity. The poems are not of the category where a poet, with a mind sensitive to the appeal of beauty lying scattered about in the path of his life, is touched by that appeal and gives expression to his emotion. In such a case no rational link can be established between his different compositions. But, in Tagore's poems, a continuous growth can be traced from his earliest writings. At any particular phase, a dominant idea takes possession of his mind and seeks expression through his pen. This idea passes through a stage of growth and then slowly changes in character, preparing the ground for the next phase of development without breaking the continuity with the earlier mood. It is, thus, a process of evolution where the idea assumes greater complexity as it approaches maturity. In this manner, the dominating theme of his poetry becomes organically linked up with minor themes which form the subject matter of his different poems and everything together weaves out a harmonious pattern. Thus, a 'unity of inspiration' links up the poems composed by him in different stages of his life. That is perhaps the reason why his poems retained their charm throughout the long period of his creative life, extending even to his last days.

The second quality imparted by the common theme is that his poetry becomes a written record of his religious experience. In its mature form, therefore, it gives a picture of his own idea of what religion should be. Here, ultimately, a peculiar kind of humanism takes shape which draws its inspiration from his piety. A study of his poetry is a key to the understanding of the spiritual make-up of his mind. This chapter is, thus, an attempt at understanding him through his poetry.

*The Vision

The quest for his religion started with nature which was his first love. As has been already stated, his sensitive mind used to react vigorously to nature even during his early boyhood. Small wonder, Tagore's spiritual self-realisation was initiated through the hand of nature; not nature as a subject of knowledge but that aspect of it which stimulates the imagination through the harmony of forms, colours, sounds and movements. In other words, he started his journey as a poet of nature. He himself observes, "the first stage of my realisation was through my feeling of intimacy with nature".*

Tagore's poems on nature pulsate with the thrill he experienced on contact with her in her various moods. But they are not just impressive descriptions of emotion roused by whatever is striking and beautiful in nature. They raise questions about the hidden spirit beyond and, at a later stage, even betray a strong yearning for physical contact with it.

The clouds of autumn, for example, float across the blue sky and cast shadows on the paddy fields below. In describing the beauty of this phenomenon in one of his poems, he is reminded of the master hand that works from behind this show and says:

"A hide and seek game is on today between
sunlight and shadow fleeting across
the paddy fields.

Who is he that has floated rafts of
white clouds in the blue sky? **

At a later stage, we find that mere inquisitiveness about the hidden hand did not any longer satisfy Tagore. A positive yearning developed for contact with this power whose presence is rather felt than seen. Here is an example:

Thrilled by the colour of the gathering rain cloud at the advent of the monsoon, he compares it to the many-hued splendour of the spread-out tail of a peacock. The poem depicts a mixed feeling of joy excited by the beauty of the rain cloud and agony caused by an intense yearning for contact with the unseen presence in the sky above. In translation, the first stanza of this poem reads:

**Religion of Man*, "Man's Universe"

**Saradotsab

“My mind dances today like
 a peacock.
 The upsurge of feeling tinged
 with a hundred hues
 Expands like the peacock’s tail.
 And joyously turning its gaze up
 towards the sky looks for
 somebody with a yearning heart.”*

Slowly, through a series of experiences, the true nature of the unseen presence felt behind different aspects of nature became clear to him. Like his Vedic ancestors, as he says, he came to realise that behind the different facets of nature, a single pervasive principle is at work. Thus in the different aspects of nature, he read the revelation of a single inner being. In his own words, “The wonder of the gathering clouds hanging heavy with the unshed rain, the sudden sweep of storm arousing vehement gestures along the line of coconut trees, the fierce loneliness of the blazing summer noon, the silent sunrise behind the dewy veil of autumn morning, kept my mind with the intimacy of a pervasive companionship.”**

Tagore realised that the unseen principle that works behind nature not only controls the course of life on earth, but also regulates the movements of the heavenly bodies. That its presence is more felt than seen is brought out by a beautiful analogy from life in rural India. It is common sight that the cattle graze in the village pasture in an orderly fashion without the cowherd being in their midst. However, he makes his presence felt by playing on his flute from a shady nook. Tagore compares the heavenly bodies to the cattle and the unseen principle to the cowherd, and says:

“These are thy luminous cattle,
 these groups of suns and stars;
 From what hidden corner thou
 playest thy flute and grazest

**Kshanika*

***Religion of Man*, “The Vision”

them under the endless celestial
sphere?''*

Tagore's ideas, later, took shape as a pantheistic conception of the Universe. In this view, the creator is working imminently in the creation. He felt that a single principle was working throughout nature; giving it unity and harmony in spite of apparently conflicting pulls of different forces. There is nothing static in it; birth and death, destruction and creation, mark the rhythm of its inexorable and eternal dance-march. Thus, in nature he discovered a pantheistic God which works impersonally, whom he sometimes compares to a flowing river and at others to the mythical God Nataraja dancing the cosmic dance of creation and destruction. His deductions are excellently summarised in his following observation:

“God is not away from us, nor in churches. He is within us. He pervades unperceived life and death, pleasure and pain, sin and piety, union and separation. This earth itself is His eternal temple. This live, conscious, colossal temple is being recreated constantly in a variety of new shapes. There is nothing new on it, everything in it is in constant flux and yet its profound unity, its reality and its abiding character is never lost, because in this flitting diversity an abiding truth is manifest.”**

This pantheistic concept, however, could not satisfy his mind. While his intellect might have derived some satisfaction from it, he craved for more intimate contact with the all-pervasive power on an emotional plane.

This is quite understandable, for, endowed with a highly developed emotional faculty, Tagore could not remain satisfied with a conception which does not allow of personal relationship with God. He wanted to exchange love with God; but such an act was impossible as the pantheistic God discovered in nature was an impersonal principle. Pervading all space, all time and all objects, He is too vast and too subtle to be imprisoned in the strait jacket of a personality.

**Gitali*

***Tagore's Works*, Visva-Bharati edition, Vol. IV

On the other hand, Tagore's emotional needs, needed to clothe God with a personality. Otherwise how can a vast and pervasive principle be imagined as capable of offering love to insignificant individuals like human beings. After pondering deeply over the problem, he found a solution. Perhaps he took his cue from the book of nature and a poem strikingly suggests the line on which he solved this problem.

The solution proceeds from a common-place fact of nature. The sun is a source of unlimited energy and sends out its rays through billions of miles of empty space. The vast sky appears to be the only suitable place to contain it. The dew drop hanging precariously on the tip of a blade of grass ordinarily appears to be too insignificant to deserve the sun's attention. But, does the dew drop not reflect the sun's rays on its bosom? Evidently, therefore, the colossal sun is capable of playing a double role. As an impersonal life-giving force, it pervades infinite space and simultaneously, it is capable of paying individual attention to the tiny dew drop. The poem runs thus:

“Who can other than the sky, hold thee,
 O Sun? I can only dream of thee,
 but cannot serve thee,
 The dew-drop, said wailing.
 ‘It is true that with my sweeping rays
 I light up the world,
 Still I can allow myself to be caught
 By the tiny dew-drop and can love it,’
 Said the sun smiling,
 Coming down to the bosom of the dew-drop.”*

Could not God also be conceived as endowed with personality without sacrificing His pervasive character? Learning the lesson from nature, Tagore thought that the supreme principle was capable of working in two different planes. Burdened with the function of sustaining the Universe, it works as an impersonal principle in the plane of activity. This is where God is an impersonal force; but in the other plane where He looks for delight, He is capable

**Utsarga*

of clothing Himself with a personality and establish a bond of love with human beings. Tagore calls it the plane of *Ananda*.*

Tagore imagines poetically that the personal God is keen to seek the love of individual men for His own self-realisation. He believed that the super-abundance of beauty in nature, which serves no practical needs, is inspired by a desire for delight and to transmit such delight to human hearts. To his eyes, the beauty manifest in nature is like the love letter of God. The beauty of flowers, the star-spangled sky at night, the display of colours in the evening sky are meant to delight the heart of men and are so many messages of invitation to a relationship of love from God. He argues that such a theory alone can explain the delight we experience in the beauty manifest in nature. He says:

“The final meaning of the delight which we find in a rose can never be in the roundness of its petals, just as the final meaning of the joy of music cannot be in a gramophone disc. Somehow we feel that through a rose the language of love reached our heart.”**

It appears that this belief in the dual role of the supreme principle was also fortified in his mind by an experience obtained through a vision. He has described it in detail on more than one occasion. It was during one of his visits to Sahajadpur in North Bengal where there was an office of the family estate fitted out with a rest house. One noon while looking vacantly through an open window while waiting for a bath, the vision came to him. He says, “Suddenly, I became conscious of a stirring of soul within me. My world of experience in a moment seemed to become lighted and facts that were detached and dim found a greater unity of meaning.”***

In substance; he felt that God who is infinite and impersonal in the plane where the sustenance of the universe is concerned, becomes clothed in personality and takes a seat in the heart of the true devotee. He thus becomes defined in humanity and seeks the co-operation and love of the individual human being whose life

**Santiniketan, Saundarya*

***Religion of Man, The Vision*

****Ibid*

he wants to guide to a direction along which it will attain fulfilment. So, according to this view, there can be two separate entities working within an individual human being. One is the individual self that is intimately connected with the day-to-day routine of life. The other offers to guide and control the individual's activities to be able to shape it in the manner it would like if only the individual soul would reciprocate the love and voluntarily co-operate. The personal version of God in this comradeship appears to be interested in such a joint endeavour to serve His own interest of finding expression through the activity of His chosen devotee. The shaping of the life of the individual to perfection is like a work of art in which the personal God sitting in the inner chamber of the devotee's heart seeks His best expression, just as an artist seeks it through directing his drama. To make his point, Tagore compares the personal God to a director who is interested in seeing that the actor playing a particular character in his drama does it successfully and seeks the latter's cooperation, to be able to mould him to his satisfaction. To this personal God of his discovery, therefore, he gives the name *Jivan Devata*, 'the Lord of Life.' It is the inner force that directs and shapes the Poet's life and imparts to it a unity and direction.

This is a unique conception which has no parallel elsewhere in the field of philosophy or religion. It is not based so much on philosophical reasoning as on faith derived from personal vision. It is not fair, therefore, to assail it because it may lack a rational basis. It was more dictated by his emotional needs than his intellectual curiosity. To this weakness he clearly confesses, as will be confirmed by the following observation :

“This thought of God has not grown in my mind through any process of philosophical reasoning. On the contrary, it has followed the current of my temperament from early days until it suddenly flashed into my consciousness with a direct vision.”*

The idea of *Jivan Devata*, where God becomes humanised, appears to have taken full form quite early in his life. A poem

**Religion of Man*, Man's Universe

bearing the same name and inspired by the same theme has found a place in the collection of poems *Chitra*, which was published in 1896, during his stay in North Bengal. Presumably, the inspiration came from the vision he had experienced in course of his tour of inspection in the estates, which he must have undertaken shortly before that. The theme appears to have made its full impact felt on his poetry much later in his life. It was in the poems finding a place in the Bengali *Gitanjali* that the concept of *Jivan Devata* appeared as the central idea. This book was published in 1910 while the earliest poems contained in this collection are dated 1906. Evidently, therefore, the idea remained dormant for nearly a decade. This intervening period was filled up by short stories, serious poems, patriotic poems and even a novel. Very probably the idea had been formed, but the Poet's mind had not yet been prepared for the reaction to it. It was perhaps the intervening period of travail and misfortune, including a series of bereavements in which he lost his near and dear ones, that hastened the process and enabled him to draw himself within his own mind to be able to propound this grand concept. Perhaps, the following lines quoted earlier from one of his songs, lend confirmation to this proposition:

“If in the darkness of sorrow glows
thy benign light
Let it be so.”

Once this theme got possession of his mind, it again made literary history. He reaped the richest harvest of poetry during this phase of his life. The central theme of *Jivan Devata* became the common inspiration of verses which filled up three books published within a span of four years. They are the *Gitanjali*, the *Gitimalya* and the *Gitali*; the latter two published in 1914. These poems reach a high level of poetic excellence both for the simple grace of their style and the depth of their emotional content.

The subject proved so fascinating that he made it the theme of one of his symbolic dramas called *Raja* published in the same year as the *Gitanjali*. Ten years after, he produced a more compact version of the same drama and named it *Arup Ratan*, which means the ‘Jewel without Form.’ The hero in this drama is the personal

version of God who establishes contact with the individual soul imagined as queen Sudarsana in the dark chamber of her heart.

The three books referred to above record in verse the history of the second phase of Tagore's poetic life as well as his progress towards spiritual self-realisation. The poems reflect the thoughts and moods that swayed his mind under the influence of the grand theme of *Jivan Devata*. His yearning for contact with God as person, his disappointment, almost agonised frustration, over the delayed union and the ultimate union which brought him an ecstasy of feeling, are all described in beautiful language in these poems.

But, this grand theme contained a seed of disappointment which, in the ripeness of time germinated, to prepare Tagore for the turning of the road which took him to the last phase of his journey to spiritual self-realisation. As soon as the intoxication of this grand theme passed off, Tagore found that the kind of religious experience this concept offered was not fully satisfactory. When one entertains a deep feeling of love and respect for a particular person, one feels an urge to offer service to him. Reverence should not be felt emotionally in the heart, but expressed also in action through different acts of personal service. But the *Jivan Devata* as conceived by Tagore was incapable of receiving personal service, as He has been imagined as the king of the dark chamber and *Arup Ratan*.

The need to offer service initiated the process in his mind which ultimately discovered the religion after his heart, which truly humanised God. Man's three dominant faculties have exercised considerable influence in shaping his religion. They are the three faculties of the intellect, the emotion and the will, which correspond to the Indian concept of *Jnana*, *Bhakti* and *Karma*. There can be three distinct approaches accordingly as one of the faculties assumes the dominant role in shaping man's religion. Tagore realised through his own personal experience that such separate approaches lead to unsatisfactory results.

His approach through nature was an approach through intellect. His efforts to discover God through this path led him to a pantheistic conception of God, where He works as a pervasive impersonal

force whose presence can be inferred but who cannot be perceived directly through the senses. So he observes: “We can acquire knowledge about Brahma as manifest in the universe only in general terms, through inferential knowledge.”*

His approach through the faculty of emotion led him to discover his *Jivan Devàta*, ‘the presiding deity of the poet’s life.’ It provided intense satisfaction to the emotional faculty, but it had also its limitations. It provided no scope for the satisfaction of his urge to serve God, as the personal God according to his conception, had no physical incarnation. If he was disappointed there, he could turn to His physical manifestation in the form of the inanimate world. But there is no point in that as it is not endowed with a personality and does not need personal service either. So he observes, “It is not possible to exchange feelings of love with water, land, the sky, the planets and the stars—our welfare activities bear no connection with them.”**

Through a process of elimination he, therefore, came to the conclusion that the best way to seek complete union with God through all the three faculties was to seek contact through man. By realisation that man is that manifestation of God which is closest to oneself, one can forge a link through the intellect; establish an emotional link by loving fellow human beings; and serve God in incarnate form by serving mankind in general.

So, he says: “Our rights are satisfied to the full extent possible only when our faculty of knowledge, love and work can give expression to all our latent powers. That is why there is no other way to enforce our right to establish contact with God simultaneously through knowledge, love and service except through humanity.”***

Tagore thus came to the end of his quest by discovering God in man. It became his conviction that one could realise God in the completest form only through man. He can be comprehended

**Tagore’s Works*, Visva Bharati Edition, Vol. XIII

***Tagore’s Works*, Visva Bharati Edition, Vol. XII

***Ibid

directly through the intellect, being endowed with personality, he can reciprocate love and lastly, being capable of receiving service, God can be served through him also. Thus through him God is accessible simultaneously by the path of knowledge (*Jnana*), love (*Bhakti*) and service (*Karma*). Tagore's quest thus ended in a special type of humanism where man becomes the centre of interest because he manifests to man God in the most effective form.

Tagore fortifies this proposition by applying an analogy. He argues that God is manifest to man in different forms, both animate and inanimate. We can establish contact with Him in a concrete form through any of them. But this should not be selected at random, the form that is closest to man should reasonably be the choice. This should obviously be man because through him God makes the nearest approach to man. To make his point, he refers to the case of a woman. She can, he says, hold different relations with different persons. To one she is a daughter, to another a sister, to a third a friend, but to her child, she is most intimately known as mother. Similarly, God may be manifest in various forms, but He is closest to man as man. To put it in his own words:

“Just as a mother is most intimate to and most directly in contact with her child in her relation as mother, while other diverse relations with the world are unknown and unusable to him, God is manifest to man in the truest and most intimate form in humanity; it is through such relation that we know Him, love Him and offer service to Him.”*

This very idea also represents his poetic thought in its maturest form. We find, therefore, that the idea of ‘divinity in man’ is the source of inspiration of many of his poems composed at this stage of his life. It also became the subject matter of his sermons and serious essays. In the Hibbert Lectures, which he was asked to deliver by the Oxford University in 1930, this theme also became the subject matter. That is why he gave the book which embodies these lectures the name, “The Religion of Man”.

At this stage, therefore, his mind ceased to take delight in contact with his personal God within the dark chamber of his heart

**Tagore's Works*, Visva Bharati Edition, Vol. XIII

and preferred to establish contact through common men. They were not in his eyes members of the ignoble multitude but incarnation of God. This forms the inspiration of a poem, the first stanza of which runs as follows:

“Where Thou art in union with the multitude,
I shall seek union with Thee.
Neither in the forest, nor in solitude,
Nor inside my own mind,
But where Thou art the beloved of everybody
Thou art my beloved too.”*

It is the same inspiration that impells him to point out to the pious men that there is no point in looking for God in temples and offering Him flowers and burning incense there and that they should rather seek Him among the common men. He says:

“Come out of thy meditation and leave aside the flowers and incense.
What harm is there if thy clothes become tattered and stained? Meet
him and stand by him in toil and the sweat of thy brow.”**

That the man of piety should meet God in toil and sweat, appears to carry special significance. In our exposition of Tagore’s humanism, we have stated that according to this concept mankind in general should be the object of love and service on the idea that man represents the closest manifestation of God to us. It appears that this same line of thought underwent a slight modification to hold the view that God is specially manifest among the underprivileged classes. The labourer engaged in making roads, the farmer growing crops, and in general, people who live literally by the sweat of the brow and form the lowest strata of society represent Him in a more significant way. Perhaps it echoes the thought ascribed to Jesus Christ, “Blessed are the poor, for their’s is the kingdom of heaven”. This is evidently prompted by the realisation that such men need our love and attention, and service to them gives the best return.

As a typical example of this thought, we may refer to another poem where he says that God should not be looked for among the

*Gitanjali

**Ibid (English Version)

well-to-do classes favoured by fortune, but among the poorer classes:

“He is there where the tiller is tilling
 the hard ground and where the
 path-maker is breaking stones.
 He is with them in sun and
 in shower and his garment
 is covered with dust.
 Put off thy holy mantle and even
 like him come down on the dusty soil.”*

In this perspective, disinterested work promoting the welfare of mankind in general, and the under-privileged classes in particular, becomes the best way to satisfy the religious urge. Welfare activities take the place of performance of rituals and saying of prayers. Tagore lays down a simple workable criterion for selecting such work. Whatever activity is conducive to the general welfare of mankind is good for this purpose. It does not matter if it is a small action leading to small results. The point is that it should not so much promote the interest of a particular individual as the community in general. The test is that the work should promote universal welfare. A servant of God, should, therefore, become a universal worker. Here is his own exposition of the term:

“In order to be united with Him, we have to divest our work of selfishness and become *Viswa-Karma*, ‘the world worker’, we must work ‘for all’. I do not mean for countless number of individuals. All work that is good, however small in extent, is universal in character. Such work makes for realisation of a *Viswa-Karma*, the world worker who works for all.”**

Tagore thus got his own brand of humanism as a reward for his sustained search for a suitable form of religious expression. In this humanism, man becomes the object of love and service, not in his own right, but as that manifestation of God where He is closest to him. This conforms to the spirit of Indian tradition. Although humanism as a concept directly related to piety had not

**Gitanjali* (English Version)

***Religion of Man*, Spiritual Union

been developed in ancient times, its germinal form can be traced in ancient literature and practice. For example, we may refer to the first sentence of the *Ishopanishad* which forms part of the *Yajur Veda Samhita*. It says that whatever we see in the universe is clothed in God and, therefore, we should enjoy our life with restraint. Evidently, what is meant is that we should so regulate our conduct that the interest of other human beings is not violated. It encourages altruistic actions for the reason that all beings form part of one pervasive entity. The conduct prescribed is inspired by the appreciation of the fact that human beings reflect divinity.

A continuity of the thought may also be traced to later Indian literature. *Manu Samhita* for example, prescribes four kinds of *Yajnas* that is, religious practices for the householder. One of them is *Nri-Yajna*, that is service of man. Even in popular literature of the middle age, similar sentiments are traceable. For example, here is a couplet from the *Hitopodesha* of Narayan Pandit:

“Oh son of Kunti, serve the poor
And do not give money to God.
Medicine is prescribed for a patient.

What will a man in good health do with it?”

Even among common people who are not acquainted with religious texts, ideas have gained currency which breathe the humanistic spirit. People are familiar with the expression *Naranarayan* which identifies God with man or the similar expression *Daridranarayan* which ascribes godhood to the under-privileged man.

These thoughts are inspired by the feeling that God is best served through service of man and particularly, of the under-privileged man. Here humanism is based on religion.

Western humanism, however, maintains no link with religion. Evidently, it is the product of the impact of science on religion and philosophy. The typical example is the Positivism of Comte. Having lost faith in the capacity of religion or even philosophical speculation to throw any light on the nature of ultimate reality, he proposed to limit the pursuit of knowledge to the explanation of the world of phenomena through science by linking them with

the laws of nature. He, therefore, built a new socio-religious view as a substitute for religion which prescribed that in place of God, man in general and great men in particular should be the object of worship. Additionally, he prescribed altruistic activities promoting the welfare of man.

Comte's humanism was thus born of scepticism which lost its faith both in religion and philosophy. He, therefore, substituted the worship of God by the worship of man who to his mind, is the only tangible reality. Similarly, he substituted service of God by service of man. It flourished in isolation from religion.

Indian thinking of humanism in contrast was directed to a different channel. At the first instance, it does not stem from scepticism. It found no reason to discard the belief in an ultimate reality whether pantheistic or theistic in form. It bases its humanism on belief in God and advocates service of man by identifying God with him. It is founded on faith in religion and is directly linked with it.

Tagore's humanism maintains this tradition. It stems from his living faith in God and draws inspiration from religion. This feature makes his humanism more effective than the Western type of humanism. The urge to offer service to God is both strong and universal. By linking piety with humanism, it provides, therefore, a stronger inspiration than Western humanism: it harnesses piety to its cause.

X

RECOGNITION AS A WORLD FIGURE

IN HIS early age, Tagore had deplored that the voice of India was hardly audible to the outside world in sharp contrast with the ancient days of her glory, when her sons took pride in proclaiming that they had attained knowledge or the supreme reality. In the cultural map of the world, India had not been placed. Evidently, finding no other means of doing that, he took upon himself the task of preparing for this role. Perhaps he realised that he was destined to be the spiritual ambassador of India.

He had all along nurtured his talents in a remote corner of India, and inspired by his spirit of nationalism had given expression to his thoughts and ideas in Bengali, which happened to be his mother tongue. Although spoken by a sizeable population of Eastern India, it had not yet developed its literature fully but it had been just put on the way to it by such stalwart literary figures as Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. In the process, they enriched Bengali literature to an immeasurable degree. Even so, it was the language of a corner of India which could hardly attract the attention of people outside India. It is true that within Bengal, Tagore had since established his reputation as an unrivalled literary figure. But still, he remained undiscovered to the people of the outside world.

In fact, up to the stage of the publication of the *Gitanjali* in 1910, Tagore's nephew Abanindranath, sharing the common compound of their ancestral house, was much better known to the outside world than he. This nephew had won recognition as the founder of a new school of art. As his fame spread to the outside world, foreign artists of distinction would call at his residence to discuss art. They included the Japanese painters Taikkan and

Okakura. Havell, the celebrated artist, was one of his staunch admirers. It was through his art again that a friendship grew up between Abanindranath and the celebrated British artist Rothenstein. While these artists kept such close contact with his nephew, they hardly knew about Tagore himself. Thus sheltered from the eyes of the world, he attained the height of his power after a long and strenuous period of preparation. He was now poised for undertaking the role which destiny earmarked for him. But before that, he needed to be introduced to the people of the outside world. This process of introduction was carried out through a strange combination of circumstances as if an unseen force was working its design through them.

Ever since the death of his dear wife Mrinalini Devi in 1902, Tagore had little occasion to receive comforts of home life. On the contrary, a series of bereavements in the family and widespread political disturbance in the country had combined to cause considerable strain on his body. Having none to look after him properly, his health slowly deteriorated so that in 1912, it almost came to a point of breakdown. Apart from the general run-down condition of his health, he became a victim of a disease for which surgical treatment was recommended by his medical advisers. Under their advice, it was finally decided that he should go to London for treatment.

It was arranged that he should leave for the United Kingdom early in 1912 on board a ship, directly from Calcutta. It was also arranged that he would be accompanied by his son, Rathindranath and daughter-in-law, Pratima Devi. So passage was booked and cabins were reserved. The ship had docked at Chandpal Ghat and the luggages were sent ahead on the previous day.

In the evening preceding Tagore's departure, a farewell party had been arranged at the residence of Ashutosh Choudhury, a distinguished judge of the Calcutta High Court, who had married Tagore's niece. The elite of the society had gathered there to give him a hearty send-off. The party over, he returned home late at night. Unfortunately, he became seriously ill the next day. The journey had, therefore, to be cancelled and the luggages taken back.

He was soon cured of his illness and so the passage could be booked again. But that would take time. The question was where he would spend the intervening time. The doctors ruled out his return to Santiniketan as that would get him involved in the day-to-day administration of his school there. Such long stay in his ancestral house in Calcutta would not suit his temperament either. So it was finally decided that he should spend this period at Shelidah in the peaceful atmosphere of the country-house where he had spent the best period of his family life. Apart from being an agreeable and healthy place to live in, that would ideally suit the purpose of the doctors, as that would enforce complete rest through isolation.

So, Tagore went to Shelidah to spend his leisure. He had been advised not to undertake writing even, as that would cause strain which the condition of his health would not permit at that stage. In the circumstances, having no permission to do any kind of serious work, he was confronted with the problem of spending his time. Luckily he got the inspiration that he might devote his time to translating his poems into English. He was encouraged to do so by the fact that earlier, a few such translations published in the *Modern Review*, had drawn appreciative remarks from Jagadish Chandra Bose and Ananda Coomaraswamy.

Thus, by an accidental combination of circumstances, Tagore set his mind to the work of translating some of his poems into English. Little did he anticipate that this would have far reaching consequences in the literary world and would incidentally, bring about a turning point in his eventful career. In the seclusion of the bungalow at Shelidah, he selectively translated many pieces from different collections of his poems. Out of them, he put together 103 poems and gave the compilation the name 'Gitanjali' with the corresponding English title 'Song Offerings'.

Perhaps he was inspired to name it thus by two considerations. For one thing, out of a total of 103 poems, as many as 55 had been taken from his Bengali *Gitanjali* and the rest from eight other books. Of them, the book that made the highest contribution to this collection was *Gitimalya*, as many as 16 having been taken from

it. Both books had been inspired by a common theme, namely, the relationship between the poet and his personal God whom he called his *Jivan Devata*. So the dominant note was the expression of love to his God and in that sense, it was an offering of songs to God. The Bengali *Gitanjali* is a collection exclusively of poems inspired by this theme. Here, this formed the dominant note.

In due course, the visit to England was arranged for. This time the same party boarded a P. & O. boat on May 27, 1912 from Bombay and reached London on a summer evening. Their travel agent Thomas Cook & Sons had booked for them a hotel at Bloomsbury which they reached from Charing Cross Tube Station.

It had been arranged by a previous appointment that Tagore would call on William Rothenstein, the artist, the next day. During the journey to London, Rathindranath had been entrusted with the custody of the manuscript of the *Gitanjali* which had been kept in an attache case. Tagore asked him to produce it before leaving for his appointment with Rothenstein, but to their dismay, it was found missing. A frantic search was made which was at last rewarded by tracing it to the left-luggage office. Presumably it had been left behind in the tube-train by which they travelled to their hotel. In his reminiscences, Rathindranath remarks: "One can imagine my relief when at last, I discovered the lost property there. Since then, I had often wondered what shape the course of events might have taken if the manuscript of *Gitanjali* had been lost through my negligence."*

The question posed here is worth pondering over indeed! Maybe Tagore would have remained undiscovered to the Western world or at least that event might have been considerably delayed. Either alternative would have proved a misfortune to the cause of world culture. The great role played by the *Gitanjali* (Song Offerings) by proving a turning point in the career of Tagore would have been missed.

If *Gitanjali* was the medium through which Tagore was introduced to the outside world, it was William Rothenstein who set

*Rabindranath Tagore, *On the Edges of Time*. With Father in London.

the course of events for it. In fact, he was very well suited for the role he played most willingly and sincerely at the behest of Tagore. An eminent artist by profession, he enjoyed a position in society by virtue of his achievements in the field. His wide interest on the other hand, had won him a wide circle of friends who were prominent in the field of art, politics and literature. As a good conversationalist, he was an ideal host. He was in a position to put Tagore in contact with any distinguished man of letters in the United Kingdom.

It had been arranged that in the evening of July 7, 1912, Rothenstein would invite a party of literary friends to his house where W.B. Yeats would read out the poems from the *Gitanjali*. The party also included Henry Nevinson, the American poet. Ezra Pound, May Sinclair and C.F. Andrews. The programme was a complete success. The choice group of listeners heard the poems with rapt attention and their quality simply charmed their hearts. This appreciation led to the immediate acceptance of Tagore as one of the greatest poets of the age.

Letters of appreciation poured in the next day. The one which came from C.F. Andrews recorded, "It was the haunting melody of the English so simple, like all the beautiful sounds of my childhood. that carried me completely away."* He confessed that "the new wine of Rabindranath's poetry had intoxicated him".

Andrews, better known in India as 'the friend of the poor', was a clergyman who used to function in the Punjab. He was attracted to Tagore after reading some stray pieces of Tagore's poems translated into English. The sitting at Rothenstein's house provided the opportunity for these two persons to come close to each other and know each other intimately. The effect was the kindling of a deep respect and affection shared by them, between themselves, which gave birth to a life-long friendship. As a token of the deep regard he entertained for Andrews, Tagore dedicated to him his English book *Sadhana* bearing the sub-title, 'Realisation of Life'. which was published just after this event in 1913.

*Rabindranath Tagore, *On the Edges of Time*. With Father in London.

It is worthwhile to ponder as to why Tagore's English translations of his poems made such profound impression on the minds of his distinguished English listeners. Perhaps the most reliable answer will come from the reactions recorded by the persons who participated in this historic sitting.

In her letter of appreciation to Tagore written the very next day, May Sinclair observed, "It is not only that they have an absolute beauty, a perfection as poetry, but they have made present for me forever, the divine thing that I can only find by flashes and with an agonising uncertainty".

She further observed that "he had put into English things it is despaired of ever seeing written in English at all or in any Western language".

From the introduction written by W.B. Yeats to this book, it appears that what touched his heart most was a paradox. Tagore was in essence a saintly man but the writings of European saints since the Renaissance had ceased to hold the attention of men of culture as their fierce asceticism would have nothing to do with things of beauty. Here, however, was a paradox. A saint though he was to the core of his heart, Tagore loved life and beauty of nature. What is more important is that these writings not only make love of God a reality to their sophisticated mind but lift up feelings of piety 'into a greater intensity of the mood of the painter, painting the dust and the sunlight'. It makes piety and art join hands together, to make people like Yeats, brought up in the sophisticated atmosphere of Western culture, feel that they had also in flashes loved God without knowing it. Here are the exact words:

"We had not known that we loved God, hardly it may be that we believed in Him; yet looking backwards upon our lives we discover, in our exploration of the pathways of woods, in our delight in the lonely places of hills, in that mysterious claim that we have made, unavailingly, on the women that we have loved, the emotion that created this insidious sweetness."

The translations had been made in prose. They could not have, therefore, transmitted the beauty of the rhythm and metre of the

original. In other words, its euphonic beauty remained undiscovered to them. After all, these are inessential parts. On the other hand, translation in prose provides a better scope for the transmission of the thought with its delicate undertones and nuances of the original. The fact that the prose translations were appreciated without reservations proves that these had been transmitted Successfully.

Evidently, what produced this dramatic effect on the mind of the listeners was firstly the intrinsic literary quality of these poems. Secondly, as pointed out by May Sinclair, the literary dish it presented was quite a new thing in Western literature. Its novelty added to its charm. Thirdly, what is most important, it revived a dead chord in the heart of his Western listeners whose ways of life had moved them away from feeling of piety. It was through these poems that they realised that sentiments inspired by piety dressed with the skill of a literary genius of Tagore's calibre could move their hearts as deeply as objects of art and simultaneously, bring them nearer to God's living presence.

After this, things began to move more rapidly. Tagore's new friends decided to give him a reception. Only three days after, on July 10, 1912, they met at Trocadero Restaurant. Here, Yeats introduced him to a group of distinguished men of letters. He also gave a reading of some of Tagore's translations and wound up with a comment on their qualities, in course of which he observed: "In all his poems, there is one single theme: the love of God... Tagore loves nature; his poems are full of the most beautiful touches showing his keen observation and deep love. He does not count beads, but flowers. In this book, there is a ceaseless abundance of beauty."

In his reply, Tagore made an observation which carries special significance. He said: "East is East and West is West—God forbid that it should be otherwise—but the twain must meet in amity, peace and understanding; their meeting will be all the more fruitful, because of their difference; it must lead both to holy wedlock at the common altar of humanity."

It appears that at this stage of his life he realised that 'in the interest of humanity the two cultures should meet together. One specialising in science and technology had built up material prosperity for man, while the other, specialising in spiritual pursuits had attained access to values which alone could produce the touch that soothes the heart of man. For attainment of a balanced view of life they should meet together and play a complementary role. This realisation grew so much in intensity in his subsequent life that he set himself seriously to the task of carrying this message to the distant corners of the world. We shall have occasion to deal with this matter in detail in the next chapter.

After the meeting at the Trocadero Restaurant, Tagore's friends decided to publish the book themselves. The India Society sponsored their cause and it was decided that a limited number of copies would be printed for private circulation. Upon Yeats fell the task of writing out the introduction in which he recorded his own warm appreciation of the book.

In the meantime, Tagore left with his son and daughter-in-law for the United States of America for a short tour. The itinerary included New York, Chicago, Rochester, Boston and Urbana. It appears that his reputation had travelled in advance to the States and invitations came from different learned institutions for delivery of lectures. At Rochester, he was asked to address the Congress called by the Federation of Religious Liberals. Chicago University invited him to deliver a series of lectures. This was followed by similar invitations from Harvard and New York. Urbana had a special claim on him as his son had graduated from the Illinois University located there. So he spent the major part of the winter there.

After completing his itinerary in the States, Tagore returned to London in April 1913. He was admitted to hospital for treatment in June and after discharge left for home on September 4, 1913.

The English *Gitanjali* had been published towards the end of 1912.* Through it, he became introduced to the people of the

*It was dedicated to William Rothenstein, presumably in recognition of the role he played in introducing it to English men of letters

West. It received the same warm appreciation as it had earlier, from the little group of his English friends in the house of Rothenstein. Recognition came promptly. In November 1913, he was awarded the Nobel Laureate in Literature.

The conferment of this coveted prize marking his recognition as one of the greatest literary figures of the world took his countrymen by complete surprise. Recognition by his own people had never assumed an unreserved character, there having been hostile critics all the time. It appears that at least for the time being, their hostility had been silenced. Among the people in general, there was great jubilation. They became proud of his achievement and felt that their national prestige had been vindicated to some extent through it.

So an intense feeling of gratitude took possession of the mind of the people of Bengal. The representatives of the people decided to give him a public reception on November 23, 1913 at Santiniketan, as he was then staying there. The elite of the society of Calcutta assembled there to pay him their homage. The assembly sat under the shade of the mango grove at Santiniketan.

The function, however, had an unhappy ending. After the address had been read out, Tagore rose to give his reply; but to everybody's surprise, it struck a discordant note. For some unknown hidden reason, his power of self-control appeared to have slackened and his innate sense of courtesy seemed to have abandoned him. Making a sharp departure from his usual conduct, he used some hard words on the admirers who had assembled there to pay him homage. It appears that he was actuated by a feeling of resentment against his countrymen which stemmed from the awareness that they had failed to appreciate the quality of his writings by themselves and had to be helped to do so through the eyes of others. Perhaps the harsh criticism he had been subjected to by some of his countrymen had recalled the old rancour to his memory also.

The following extracts in translation from his reply will perhaps confirm the above conjecture:

“The insult and infamy that was my lot to suffer at the hand of my country were not inconsiderable in quantity and so long I had borne them with patience. In this context I have not been able to understand clearly why I received honour from outside. I did not know that God whom I had offered homage sitting on the eastern shore, would extend his right arm in the Western shore to accept the same. That I have been blessed with His grace is the true gain I have achieved.

“Be that as it may, whatever the reason, Europe has given me the garland of honour. If it carries any value, it lies in the aesthetic sense of the men of culture of that country. That has no intimate connection with our country. The award of the Nobel Prize does not necessarily enhance the literary or aesthetic quality of any composition”,*

*Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, *Rabindra Jivani*, Vol. II.

XI

INDIA'S SPIRITUAL AMBASSADOR

THE PUBLICATION of the English version of *Gitanjali*, as already stated, marked an important turning point in Tagore's life. By a fortuitous combination of circumstances, he was inspired with the happy idea of translating some of his poems into English. Through the good offices of William Rothenstein, a family friend, they were read over to a circle of Englishmen of letters. The quality of these translations touched their hearts so deeply that they undertook to publish his manuscript themselves so that Tagore could be introduced to the people of the West. The publication created quite a sensation in the literary world and the book was selected the very next year for Nobel Prize in literature. Recognition in his own country followed with equal promptitude. The University of Calcutta conferred on him the honorary degree of Doctor of Literature in recognition of his achievement. The British Government followed it up by conferring on him a knighthood on the occasion of the birthday of the King Emperor soon after.

Tagore had so long remained a literary figure whose fame had not crossed the boundaries of his country, because he had expressed himself in Bengali which was only a regional language of India. The language barrier was an effective bar to keep him screened from the view of the outside world. The publication of the *Gitanjali* in English had the effect of removing the screen and uncovering him to the eyes of the outside world. The people of the West discovered in him one of the greatest literary figures of the world. The award of the Nobel Laureate in literature put on their judgement the seal of approval of the highest world body assessing the merit of literary works. In consequence, Tagore became a world figure in his own right.

In the early part of his life, Tagore had felt deeply proud of the heritage of his country. As a Bengali, he had expressed a keen

desire that Bengal should join the chorus of world music to impart to it a sweeter tone. As an Indian, he had keenly felt that somebody should again make the voice of India heard beyond the geographical boundaries of his country as in the ancient days. Had not Tagore by developing his own powers and enriching his own literature qualified himself to fulfil both these wishes ?

The elevation of Tagore's position to that of a world figure and his own literary achievement enabling him very well to take up the role of the spiritual ambassador of India struck the mind of at least one of the great political leaders of India of those days. Mahatma Gandhi had not yet made his appearance in the Indian political field. Perhaps the greatest political figure of those days, who by his sacrifice, learning and burning patriotism was held in universal respect all over India, was the Maharashtrian leader Bal Gangadhar Tilak. Tagore himself had presumably an inner call within himself to take up this role. It must have been a point of great satisfaction to him to find that similar thoughts were being entertained independently by no less a person than Tilak. Tagore had a faint suspicion that the latter might have wanted him to undertake tours abroad for delivering speeches with a political slant, but his mind was soon disabused of this impression on getting the clarification on the point from Tilak himself. This is how Tagore records why Tilak blessed the idea :

“Lokmanya Tilak was then alive. He despatched to me a sum of rupees fifty thousand through a messenger and communicated the wish that I should visit Europe. The non-co-operation movement had not yet started, but the political agitation had assumed the intensity of a storm. He communicated to me that it was not his desire that I should involve myself in political affairs. The message that I could carry on behalf of India would be the proper work for me and I could serve India truly through such work.”*

Lokmanya Tilak had the insight to visualise that Tagore, dissociated from the political slant, would be a more effective moral force to build up a case for the success of the freedom movement

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then going on in India. As a spiritual ambassador of India, he could make the voice of India heard all over the world and by acquainting the people of other countries about her cultural heritage, he could build up a tremendous goodwill for India. That was exactly the role which Tagore was cut out for. His sensitive heart and powerful intellect had imbibed everything that was good in Indian culture, while his original way of thinking enabled him to assimilate the national culture, make it a living part of himself and then give it a new shape which was wholly his own contribution. Tagore thus stood out as the greatest figure who could function as the spokesman of India and the living symbol of her culture.

Luckily Tagore loved travelling, which trait he must have inherited from his father. We know Maharshi used to love travelling and had travelled to distant places in India. He even visited Ceylon on board a ship on one occasion. During the time when he lived in his ancestral home in Calcutta, he would regularly go out every year to spend the autumn outside. When he retired from life he used to spend most of his time in the foothills of the Himalayas. Not until he was incapacitated for journeys due to old age, did he settle down to sedentary life in Calcutta. Sentenced to a life of confinement within home in his early age, Tagore also had developed a great love for wandering about. That is perhaps the reason why he took over the management of his family estates which not only involved him in frequent journeys in rural areas of North Bengal but also of Orissa. His wanderlust must have helped him a good deal in bringing down the tedium and physical strain of the frequent journeys he undertook abroad, in his self-appointed role as the spokesman of India.

In his journeys to different parts of the world, mostly in response to invitations for lecture tours, Tagore adopted a course of his own. He would invariably take with him a group of his younger friends and admirers to accompany him. He would also keep record of his experiences abroad either in his diary or in his letters. His younger friends were thus admitted to the rich experience packed into each of these journeys abroad which would have been otherwise altogether missed by them. The second practice has placed at our

disposal reliable evidence to show how his mind reacted to the peoples and cultures he came in contact with abroad. With the tremendous publicity created by the publication of the English *Gitanjali*, followed by its selection for the Noble Prize in literature, invitations were not slow in making their appearance. Not even the First World War which started in August 1914 and engulfed the entire world proved an absolute deterrent. Although both Japan and the United States of America became involved in this war, their geographical distance from the actual scene of war made it possible for them to pay attention to cultural activities to a limited degree. Invitations came from both these countries early in 1916.

The Japanese poet, Kawaguchi sent an invitation from Japan. Tagore was not however, an altogether unknown figure in the United States. In 1912, he had paid a visit there even before the *Gitanjali* had been published. Even so, his reputation having travelled ahead of him, he received invitations for delivering lectures in different universities. The reputation that had been built up in consequence, must have been the incentive for Major Pond for offering him a programme for a comprehensive lecture tour in the United States as a commercial proposition. Tagore naturally accepted the same, as it gave him an opportunity to speak about his own country to this new seat of Western culture.

A trip *via* Europe was out of question in those days, as the thoroughfare across the seas in that part of the world, was the scene of a relentless war between German submarines and British ships. So, a voyage across the Pacific Ocean was arranged for both the forward and the return journey. Japan was to be visited first before crossing over to America. The party of companions consisted of C.F. Andrews, Willie Pearson, another English friend of Tagore, and Mukul De, a promising artist of those days.

In Japan, Tagore landed at Kobi and then proceeded to Osaka. After a short stay at these two places, he went to Tokyo where he became the guest of Taikkan, the famous Japanese artist, who was a friend of the family. After receptions and lectures in the city, a stay in the seclusion of the rural areas was arranged to enable him to come in close contact with the indigenous Japanese culture.

After a stay of three months in Japan, Tagore left for the United States. But Andrews parted company with him there and returned to India. So, for the rest of the journey, Pearson and Mukul De kept him company.

A long and strenuous programme of lectures had been arranged for him there by Major Pond, covering places across the entire country from coast to coast. It involved long railway journeys with short halts. For a considerable time, he stuck to the programme, but later it proved so great a physical strain on him that he had to cancel the rest of it. In the meantime, he had already covered places like San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, New York and Boston. On his return journey across the Pacific, he halted for some time in Japan. The journey had started in May 1916 and was terminated in March 1917.

It appears that Tagore's impression about Japan after his first visit was pleasant. Having had opportunity to live with them intimately in the rural area, he was able to get an idea of the characteristic features of the people. He admired their keen sense of beauty. Japan being the land of mountain ranges and swift streams, with the waves of the ocean lashing at her extensive shores and the snowcapped Fujiyama standing guard on them, the people had naturally developed their aesthetic sense to a high degree. That was understandable; but he had not known before to what extreme degree it had been developed. This can be gauged by the fact that they would be prepared to sacrifice even essential needs to give satisfaction to their sense of beauty. Let us hear what Tagore says on the subject himself:

“We have seen that it is possible to increase the power of one particular sense at the cost of another. Sense of beauty and emotion are both affairs of the heart. Ever since coming here, what has struck me is: it is also possible to develop the sense of beauty and the capacity to give its expression to a considerable degree, by delimiting the field of emotion and its expression. I have come across numerous cases of emotional exuberance both in our country and elsewhere; but that is missed here. I see evidence of the enjoyment of beauty so abundantly and extensively, that it becomes

clear to me that it is a phenomenon which we cannot quite understand. Even a man who is very poor goes to the length of denying himself food daily here, to be able to buy a penny's worth of flowers. The hunger of their eyes is no less keen than the hunger of their stomach.”*

What moved Tagore deeply in Japan was the high aesthetic quality of Japanese dance. It completely fell in line with his own taste. He found it decorous to the extreme so that its appeal was restricted only to the aesthetic sense. This is the compliment he paid to Japanese dance:

“I attended a demonstration of Japanese dance one day. It seemed to me that it was like the music of bodily movements. It compares to the music that is raised in our country by playing on the *Veena*. There is no break between two units. There is no gap between different poses, nor is there indication of joining together of parts; the entire body appears to sway like a creeper in blossom and showers flowers of beauty. Japanese dance is pure dance. Its dress does not permit the least exposure of the body. In dances of other countries, there is a mixture of sex appeal with beautiful bodily movements. In this dance, not even a suggestion of lust could be detected.”**

In the United States Tagore delivered a series of lectures covering diverse subjects. He talked about his own school at Santiniketan, about art and even about a purely spiritual subject in which he propounded the theory that through creativity man can extend his own horizon and achieve a second birth. The lectures he delivered there were compiled in form of a book and published under the title “Personality”. It was dedicated to C. F. Andrews who had by now become a close friend of his.

The next programme of tour started in May 1920 and continued till July 1921. It was a crowded programme which included visits to the United Kingdom, the United States of America, France, Germany, Sweden and Austria among others. This time he was

**Japan Jatri*, 13

***Ibid*

accompanied by his son and daughter-in-law. Pearson accompanied him for part of his journey as his secretary.

He first visited the United Kingdom. In sharp contrast with the warmth he had received in 1912, Tagore was given a cold reception this time. The reason was not far to seek. Only too recently, he had renounced the title of knighthood conferred by the King Emperor, as a protest against a mass massacre of his fellow countrymen by shooting at Jallianwala Bagh. The British people are formally very courteous and, when they can shed their outer shell of aloofness, they can be very cordial. But when a national interest is involved, they cannot judge conduct from a detached point of view. Evidently, the renunciation of knighthood had prejudiced the mind of the British people against him.

Tagore left England for the United States *via* France reaching there towards the end of October 1920. He had been prepared for the cold reception extended to him in England but had hardly expected a similar reception in the States. The element of surprise caused him a shock. This adverse experience continued to rankle in his heart and found itself recorded in his memoirs as follows:

“When I had just stepped into the sixtieth year, I had once visited America carrying a lot of responsibility over my head. The war in Europe was already over; even so, its intoxication made its presence felt through the red colour of America’s eyes to a degree not witnessed in Europe. Moreover, the British were then in complete possession of her ear by devious methods... They were then making American democracy think of her own problems. Their propaganda machine was set against me. The British were afraid I might speak ill of them. The Jallianwala Bagh incident had taken place.”*

America was then leading the Western countries in technological skill. Giant factories had started production of consumer goods on a scale never done before. This rapid technological development had produced a change in the structure of society as well as in the perspective of the people. Forced to live a constricted

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life in which production is the absolute controlling force, people's life centres round the process of the manufacture of goods and their consumption. Giant machines produce goods far in excess of natural needs and so people are forced to multiply their needs artificially.

In this background, Tagore apprehended that such an excessive technological development builds a sort of shell round man and alienates him from his environment. In consequence, he thought, man gathers his material wealth, but at the heavy cost of sacrificing his spiritual well-being. Leisure, which could have been devoted to cultural and spiritual activity, falls a victim to the monster machine. To make his point, he uses a metaphor and says that man builds a cage round himself which may be of gold, but which nevertheless cuts away his contact with the outside world.

To develop his idea further, he uses two contrary expressions, namely, the nest and the cage. The bird needs a nest to provide itself a home for rest, but the sky is the natural element in which it finds itself at home. The nest does not obstruct its flight to the sky but on the other hand, aids it by providing a shelter for rest. When it is, however, shut up in a cage, it gets a better place to live in, no doubt, but loses the freedom of movement in the sky. Similarly, a certain degree of technological advance is necessary to give man economic security and comfort. On the other hand, if technological development proceeds endlessly, by multiplying his needs on the material plane, he shuts himself within a cage.

How strongly he feels about this point, which to him is an utter tragedy, may be gauged from the following observation of his:

“In our highly complex modern condition, mechanical forces are organised with such efficiency, that materials are produced that grow far in advance of man's selective and assimilative capacity, to simplify them into harmony with his nature and needs.

“Such an intemperate overgrowth of things like rank vegetation in the tropics, creates confinement for man. The nest is simple; it has an early relationship with the sky; the cage is complex and costly; it is too much itself excommunicated from whatever lies

outside. And man is building his cage fast, developing his parasitism on the monster thing, which he allows to envelop him on all sides.”*

During Tagore’s visit to the States in 1920, this was the thought that was uppermost in his mind. He felt that technological skill and excessive greed for material well-being have the effect of taking out the good things of life which make it enjoyable like love and affection and aesthetic enjoyment. This provides him the theme of one of his poems in a collection published just after his return from this particular voyage which bears the title *Shishu Bholanath*.

In this poem, he imagines the power that dominates nature as totally indifferent to gains. In its eagerness to satisfy its creative urge, it ruthlessly destroys all that is worn out and old to prepare nature for a new upsurge of life. Like the winter wind it destroys to create again. The scientific man proud of his technological skill on the other hand, exploits nature to pile up material wealth like a miser and in the process alienates himself from the good things of life and enslaves his henchmen to a life of drudgery.**

Tagore’s visit to America was not however, without any gain. It was here that he picked up acquaintance with an idealistic young Englishman named Leonard Elmherst. He was an agronomist and had come over to the States for higher training in agriculture. He became engaged to an American lady coming from a wealthy family named Dorothy Whitney Straight. Both of them became great admirers of Tagore. The intimacy with Tagore grew to such a degree that Elmherst subsequently volunteered his service for carrying on experiments in rural reconstruction under the supervision of Tagore. We shall have occasion to deal with this subject in detail at a subsequent stage.

After his return from the States, he undertook an extensive tour in the continent of Europe. The itinerary covered France, Germany, Sweden and Austria. Everywhere he received a warm welcome,

**Religion of Man*, The Teacher

***Paschim Jatrir Diary*, 61.

in sharp contrast with what he had got in the States. Perhaps war-ravaged Europe felt a soothing touch in the words he uttered in the course of his tours. His son who accompanied him in these tours says that the welcome he received was very warm throughout Europe and particularly so in Germany. He says:

“In Central and Northern Europe, the people simply worshipped the ground he trod upon. In crowded meetings and railway stations we got used to the sight of the people jostling each other to approach father in order to touch the hem of his robe. The sale of his books was phenomenal. In Germany, millions of copies were sold.”*

Tagore's continental tour proved equally rewarding in another way by bringing him in intimate contact with persons of distinction who valued culture. Thus in Paris he met Professor Sylvan Levi, considered the doyen of Indological scholarship. It was here that he became acquainted with Comtesse de Nuoy, a great society figure and patron of art, as well as Romain Rolland and Henri Bergson, the philosopher.

At Darmstadt in Germany, he accepted the hospitality of Count Keyserling, the German philosopher. During his stay in Germany he also picked up acquaintance with the German scholar Winternitz of German University. While passing through Czechoslovakia, he was introduced to Professor Lesney of Czech University.

Tagore also took the opportunity of paying a visit to Sweden, to keep the standing invitation of the Nobel Committee. At Stockholm, a banquet was given in his honour in which the King of Sweden presided and the celebrated writer, Selma Lagerlof played the hostess. After that he returned home *via* Vienna. This memorable tour extending over fifteen months terminated in July 1921.

The next tour abroad materialised in March 1924. This time, the invitation came from the Chinese Government itself. Tagore was accompanied on this occasion by Kshitimohan Sen, Nandalal Bose, the famous artist, and Tagore's young English friend, Leonard Elmherst.

*Rathindranath Tagore, *On the Edges of Time*, With Father Abroad

The party left on 21st March 1924. During his visit to China Tagore halted at Shanghai, Hanchow, Nanking and Peking. He received a warm reception throughout the country. It appears that the Chinese people recognised the true significance of Tagore's visit. They realised that he represented the ancient Indian culture and civilization and his visit was a kind of revival of the old cultural ties that used to obtain between the two countries when scholars of the two countries used to exchange visits. These ideas and sentiments are reflected in the welcome address extended to him by Prof. Lian Chi Chao on his arrival in China. Here is an extract of the relevant part of his address:

“In the personality of Mr. Tagore as well as his poetry, we find that exemplification of these principles of absolute love and absolute freedom which form the basis of Hindu culture and civilisation... But I am perfectly sure that Mr. Tagore is as important to us as Asvagosha who wrote the life of the Buddha in ancient days and we hope the influence he is going to exert in China will not in any way be inferior to that of Kumarjiva or Chanti.”*

From China, Tagore paid a short visit to Japan as it was close by. It appears that his ideas about Japan underwent a slight change on this occasion. He had been highly impressed in his previous tour by her indigenous culture. On this occasion, the new Japan born out of the impact of Western culture which appeared to believe in technology and an aggressive form of nationalism, somewhat shocked him. So, he thought it necessary to sound in his lectures a note of warning.

Tagore had been shocked previously by the ugly nature of aggressive nationalism as it obtained in Europe. Equipped with power acquired through technological advancement, Europe had thrown away pretensions to moral virtues and was openly holding under sway undeveloped countries through sheer brute force for naked exploitation. What further shocked him was that Japan appeared to toe the line of the West in this respect. So he thought it proper to give her a warning. Here is an extract from one of his speeches delivered there :

*Talks in China

“But what are these products of the Nation—the machinery of destruction and profit making, the double dealing of diplomacy in the face of which moral obligation lies defeated and the spirit of human brotherhood destroyed? You have been tempted or perhaps almost compelled to accept them.”*

Within a few months of his return, a fresh invitation came from Peru. The occasion was so momentous that Tagore could hardly refuse. Peru had become independent of the Spanish Empire on 9th December 1824 and was celebrating the centenary of her independence. The Government wanted him to attend the ceremony to impart to it the importance that was due to the occasion. The cause appealed to Tagore's broad sense of humanism and in spite of the rigours of the prospective tour, he decided to undertake the long and arduous sea voyage.

Tagore left for Peru *via* Europe in September 1924. Upto France, he was accompanied by Surendranath Kar and Pratima Devi who there disembarked. He changed to a ship which would take him to Buenos Aires across the Atlantic. His friend Leonard Elmherst accompanied him as his secretary. Unfortunately, Tagore became indisposed in the course of the voyage. Consequently, on his arrival at Buenos Aires, the question arose whether he was physically fit enough to undertake the land journey across South America to Peru. Here he was received by Senora Vittorio Ocampo who became extremely solicitous about his health. Through her insistence, the journey to Peru was cancelled on grounds of health and Tagore was removed to her country house for treatment and recuperation of health.**

The kind and affectionate treatment of this lady touched Tagore's heart deeply. Their intimacy deepened into abiding friendship in recognition of which Tagore dedicated to her his next book of verse, titled *Purabi*.

The next tour abroad was initiated by an invitation from Mussolini to Italy. Although it was not of a very long duration, it

*Lectures and Addresses, International Relations

**“Rathindranath Tagore, *On the Edges of Time*, With Father on the Continent

incidentally became one of the most intensive tours of the Continent covering for the first time the states of the Balkan Peninsula. It started in May 1926 and terminated in December of the same year. Tagore was accompanied this time by a bigger party than before. It not only included his son and daughter-in-law but also their young daughter Nandini. Besides, Professor Prasanta Chandra *Mahalanobis* and his wife also formed members of the party.

After the party landed at Naples, it was received by Professor Formichi who had been specifically assigned the duty of conducting the tour under direct order from Mussolini. The party was hustled into a train and taken to Rome where Mussolini granted the poet an interview. At the express desire of Tagore, a meeting was arranged in Rome between him and the philosopher Benedetto Croce. After that, the party left for Venice where the members greatly enjoyed the journeys performed on gondolas. On the way to Switzerland, the party passed through Turin and Milan.

Although Tagore was given a good reception during his stay in Italy, there was a feeling that the atmosphere was surcharged with suspicion and that they were being watched by spies. Contact with foreigners was resented by the authorities. Perhaps the atmosphere bred by a dictatorship was responsible for this.

In Switzerland, the poet halted at Villeneuve to meet Romain Rolland. After that, the party passed through Zurich, Vienna and Paris and stopped in London. Tagore was persuaded by his friend Elmherst to spend a few days in his country home situated at Totnes in Devonshire county. Elmherst had since been married to his friend Dorothy Straight who acted as the hostess for their distinguished guest.

After a short stay at Totnes, the party came back to the Continent for another round of tours. The itinerary included Norway where Tagore met Stein Konow, Sweden, Denmark and then Hamburg, Berlin and Munich in Germany and, in the last lap, Vienna in Austria. Then started another round of tours which covered all the countries in South-eastern Europe. The first place of halt was Budapest, capital of Hungary where Tagore became indisposed. That could not however, dampen his spirit, for as soon as he got

well again, he started his tours of the Balkan states. The next place of halt was Belgrade, capital of Yugoslavia. Then the party moved to Sophia where the King of Bulgaria gave him a grand reception. The party then crossed the Danube to Bucharest. From there, they took a steamer to Istanbul on the Straight of Bosphorous, and then to Athens. On the way home, Tagore also took the opportunity of paying a flying visit to Cairo. This intensive journey must have been quite a strain for a man who was on the wrong side of sixty, but thanks to his robust health, Tagore stood it well.

The experience of the previous tour in the Continent performed in 1924 was repeated on this occasion also. People everywhere in Europe received Tagore with unusual warmth as if his visit had roused an emotional wave which rolled from one end of Europe to the other. His son Rathindranath records his experience thus:

“At every place he visited he received not only a princely reception by the Government officials as well as the populace, but was treated with the profound respect due to a prophet. At every railway station, huge crowds would gather to have *darshan* or just touch the hem of his robe.”*

The next two trips were of short duration. Of them, the first one was initiated by Professor A. A. Bake of Holland who invited him to Indonesia. It started in July 1927 and terminated by the end of October of the same year. On this occasion, he was accompanied by Professor Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, the famous philologist and Surendranath Kar, the artist. Professor Bake went ahead to receive the party on its arrival.

The party first disembarked at Singapore for paying a visit to the Malay peninsula. After that, they left for Indonesia proper. In Sumatra, he paid a visit to the ruins of the famous Burabudur temple which bears clear testimony to the fact that the people of these islands had imbibed the Hindu culture at one stage. At a later stage of their history however, they became converts to Islam except a minor group inhabiting the island of Bali which continued to practise Hinduism. The majority of the population thus professed

*Rathindranath Tagore, *On the Edges of Time*, Frontiers in Europe

Islam but retained the Hindu culture, an extraordinary phenomenon where two cultures appeared to have fused together.

Tagore paid visits to Surabaya and Djakarta in Java and then went to Bali. Dancing is extensively practised there by the women folk. Tagore was entertained with dance demonstrations by Balinese women and he highly appreciated their graceful movements of which he carried a pleasant memory back home.

During his stay in the East Indies, the artist Surendranath Kar particularly liked the print designs on fabrics which bear the technical name *Batik*. The peculiar technique adopted in the process produces a lovely pattern of intersecting meandering lines which impart to it a distinctive charm of its own. He brought this technique to Sriniketan, a sister institution of Santiniketan, and introduced it here. Its intrinsic merit caught the fancy of consumers and at present it has become a fashionable design which commands wide popularity.

On the way back, the party paid a flying visit to Bangkok, capital of Thailand, and returned home on October 27, 1927.

The next time an invitation came from Canada which carried a new significance. So long, invitations had been extended to him on the footing that Tagore was an outstanding writer; on this occasion however, there was an implicit recognition that he was an educationist with international reputation, for the invitation was to a conference to discuss educational problems sponsored by the National Council of Education of Canada. He was specifically requested to speak on education. This time he was accompanied by two young admirers, namely, Apurba Kumar Chanda, a teacher, and Sudhindranath Dutta, a budding poet. He was also accompanied by Professor Tucker who belonged to the Methodist church.

The stay in Canada lasted only ten days. As the venue of the conference was Vancouver situated on the west coast, the party undertook the voyage across the Pacific in March 1929. On the way back, they halted in Japan. There his admirers forced him to produce a new type of literary composition. It is fashionable among these people to carry small fans in hands. Plagued with requests from his admirers to put some autographed writings on

them, he was compelled to produce self-contained compositions covering only a few lines which he recorded on these fans. Such compositions were produced in such large scale that they piled up enough material for publication in the form of a book which he named 'Fire-flies' to indicate that they are small sparks of thought. It is worth reproducing a couple of specimens.

- “(1) Days are coloured bubbles
 that float upon the surface of
 fathomless nights.
- (2) Clouds are hills in vapour,
 hills are clouds in stones—
 A phantasy of time's dream.”

The next journey abroad undertaken by Tagore was not only extensive but significant in many ways. It started in March 1930 and terminated in December of the same year and covered the United States, the United Kingdom and the Continent including Russia which he was visiting for the first time. Russia had by then come firmly under the control of communists who were carrying on a great experiment for the transformation of the society. The whole world awaited his reaction to this experiment.

It was significant in another way also. In his late sixties, Tagore had been attracted to painting as a new medium of expression. In fact he became involved in it through corrections he used to make in his manuscripts. He would give these corrections some sort of a rhythmic shape and in the process phantastic forms came out. Finding interest in it, he started shaping such forms separately as an adventure into the field of art using both pen and brush. He was subsequently drawn to other subjects like human heads and figures as well as landscapes. Tagore decided to exhibit selected paintings of his in Europe and America. During this visit, therefore, a new aspect of his activity was brought to the notice of the outside world. Though not comparable to the sensation created by his English Gitanjali, it did create a stir among the people of Europe. It is significant in another way in that it showed that his mind had retained enough vitality at this late age to undertake experiments in a new form of creative activity.

Another significant fact was that on this occasion he was invited by the Oxford University to deliver the Hibbert Lectures. These lectures are normally earmarked for distinguished philosophers but this time a departure was made in favour of Tagore. By recognising him as a philosopher which he really was, the University demonstrated that its authorities had a discriminating eye which could recognise philosophical wisdom in the poetic utterances of this great man instead of looking for it exclusively among men who had studied the subject as a discipline in college.

This time Tagore was accompanied by his son and daughter-in-law. They went first to the United Kingdom as the Hibbert Lectures were due to be delivered in May 1930. The lectures he delivered here were subsequently published by the Oxford University in the form of a book which was named "The Religion of Man". Tagore's philosophy centered round his conception of religion. It is a poet's religion as he himself says and does not conform to any established form of religious practice. It started developing in his mind even from the formative stage of his life, principally guided by his inclination and temperament, and took final shape through a vision. His own comments on the subject may be referred in this connection:

"The idea of the humanity of our God or the divinity of Man the Eternal, is the main subject of this book. The thought of God has not grown in my mind through any process of philosophical reasoning. On the contrary, it has followed the current of my temperament from early days, until it suddenly flashed into my consciousness with a direct vision."*

His religious thought as it grew, found itself recorded in his poems and other writings, but in consequence, they lay all scattered about in fragments. In that respect, the publication provided invaluable material for understanding his thought. It was here for the first time that he made an effort to collect together his thoughts on his philosophy. In that way, it became extremely useful not only as a source of information on this intricate subject but as providing valuable clues for understanding his poetry which has been deeply

**Religion of Man*, Man's Universe

tinged with his philosophical thought. It supplied a readily available key to the understanding of his mind.

After completing his lectures at Oxford, Tagore went to Paris. His specific object was to hold an exhibition of his paintings in this city of artists and art connoisseurs. There was a lot of organisational work to be done. Luckily, two friends whose acquaintance he had picked up in the same city in 1920 volunteered their help. Of them, one was Comtesse de Nuoy, a famous patron of art who belonged to the city. The other was Vittorio Ocampo of Buenos Aires who had endeared herself to the poet by looking after him during his illness in 1924 on his way to Peru. Thanks to the devoted attention of these two friends, Tagore's exhibition of his paintings was organised in Paris quite successfully.

He then visited Berlin, the object again being exhibition of his paintings there. Professor Amiya Chakravarty accompanied him during this part of his journey. Here again, a lady friend in the person of Dr. Selig took over the responsibility of organising the exhibition. It is remarkable that the poet had won so many friends abroad to stand by his side at the hour of need in different foreign countries. That speaks volumes about the attractive quality of his personality.

From Berlin, Tagore left for Denmark to address a students' gathering at Elsinore after which he went to Geneva. While staying there, he got an invitation to visit Soviet Russia. He had so far not visited that country and was naturally inquisitive to know how the experiment in a new socio-political system was going on there. He therefore, warmly responded to the invitation. His appreciation of what he found good in the new system was uninhibited and spontaneous and became the foundation in subsequent times for building up strong cultural ties between the two countries.

In Moscow he was given a reception by Russian writers and a cultural association. After that he was taken to a pioneer commune where he became very intimate with the local children. Towards the end of September 1930, he returned to Moscow where he addressed a gathering in the central trade union office.

Tagore's sympathetic appreciation of Russian life warmed up his relations with the host country. They gave him all the facilities for organising an exhibition of his paintings, which also received warm appreciation.

From Russia, Tagore went to the United States as he was keen to have another exhibition of his paintings in New York also. The exhibition was duly organised through his own initiative but the warmth witnessed on previous occasion was conspicuously missing. There was no enthusiasm to hear him and consequently, no meetings or lecture tours materialised. Presumably, his open appreciation of what he found good in Russian society had dampened any possible warmth in the heart of his American friends.

Tagore has recorded his experience of his visit to Russia in the form of letters which have been compiled together and published under the title *Russiar Chithi*. The contents of these letters created quite a sensation both in our country and abroad. The communist ideology which had inspired the experiments that were being carried on in that country, was radically new and understandably, there was a good deal of prejudice against it. While his outspoken utterances praising things which he found good in Russian life earned him the friendship of the Russian people, they were not unoften bitterly criticised by many of his own countrymen. In fact, these critics provoked him to join with them in a controversy which is reflected in some of these letters. To do justice to Tagore, it must however, be noted that he did just what an unprejudiced mind with his sensitivity would do in such circumstances. If he praised what he thought was good, his discerning mind did not fail to point out the major defects.

Two broad features of the Russian system excited his admiration. One was the large-scale arrangement for imparting education to the masses and the other was elevating the under-privileged classes to a position which helped them to develop a sense of self-respect.

Tagore did not, however, fail to notice the one-sided character of the ideas that inspired these achievements. In society, there are two parties, namely, the community and the individual. A system

which has not succeeded in reconciling their contrary interests keeps a hidden seed of trouble within it. On the other hand, there is a symbiotic relationship between the two, and, therefore, a reconciliation of their conflicting interests is conducive to the welfare of both. Unfortunately, after the industrial revolution, the growth of the capitalist system undermined the interest of the community as it promoted the interest of the individual to an undesirable degree leading to the concentration of wealth and economic power in the hands of a few. As a reaction to this, under the new system, the interest of the community has received exclusive attention. This also creates an imbalance and, therefore, is equally undesirable. It appears that this more or less represents the opinion of Tagore on this controversial subject. For confirmation of this, some relevant extracts may be quoted from his letters.

As regards education in Russia, he observed as follows:

“What I see at present strikes me with wonder. Education is the biggest of all our problems. So long the majority of the people had been denied full facilities for education, which in India is almost wholly denied, one cannot help feeling surprised to see how education is being spread at all levels of the society with surprising enthusiasm. What impresses is not only the number covered by education, but its comprehensive character and its speed.”*

Evidently, the extensive measures adopted for the spread of education moved Tagore. The method, however, did not quite satisfy him. He had noted that the method had been so moulded that it tended to destroy the capacity to think originally and to simultaneously shape the mind of the students to conform to the desired type like consumer goods produced on a large scale in factories. He did not hesitate to express his dislike for such a system as the following quotation will show:

“I do not say that there is no defect in this, rather there is serious defect, for which they will have to face trouble some day. Stated briefly, the defect lies in the fact that through the methods adopted

**Russiar Chithi*—1

for imparting education, they have moulded a die. But personality moulded to a die is not durable.

If the theory of education cannot reconcile itself to a living mind, one day either the die will be shattered to pieces or the mind will wither away through constriction or be reduced to a machine-driven tool.”*

Similarly, as regards the new economic system evolved under the new State, he says:

“What I liked most here is the complete disappearance of the coarse pride in wealth. For this single reason, the sense of self-respect of the common man has developed without impediment. All under-privileged groups like the farmer and the labourer have been able to stand up with an erect head after shaking off the crushing weight of the pride of the privileged. I have been as much surprised as pleased to notice this.”**

But the new economic system adopted in Russia had not only socialised production but also denied the freedom of action and ownership of the individual. Tagore did not fail to notice the anomaly in this new system as will be evident from his observations quoted below:

“I do not think that there is a solution of this problem other than by way of a compromise; in other words, individual ownership of property should be retained and yet a limitation should be imposed on the individual’s right to enjoyment. The surplus outside this limit should come to the use of the community. That alone can prevent ownership of property from culminating in cheatings inspired by greed or cruelty.

“In its effort to solve this problem Soviet Russia has denied its existence. There is no end of coercion to that end. It cannot be said that the individual man should have no freedom of action. What I mean is that the individual should have what he essentially needs, but everything beyond that should come to the benefit of

**Russiar Chithi-1,*

***Russiar Chithi-2,*

the community. The solution lies in admitting claim of both the individual and the community.”*

Tagore had by now attained seventy years of age. Between 1912 and 1930, he had undertaken journeys outside India as many as nine times. Weighed down with years, he was no longer able to subject himself to similar strain. Even so, he would not refuse to respond to invitations if they helped to establish cultural ties with the outside world, a cause dear to his heart.

So, when the invitation came from Reza Shah Pehlavi, the Emperor of Persia, Tagore had no option but to accept it. The journey was done this time by air. Pratima Devi, Kedarnath Chatterjee and Amiya Chakravarty accompanied him.

He first visited Shiraz where both the poets Saadi and Hatiz had been buried. A reception was arranged in the gardens attached to the tomb of Saadi. Subsequently, he paid a visit to the tomb of Hafiz.

He was given a grand reception in the capital city of Teheran which was followed by an audience with the Emperor. Everywhere he was accorded a very warm reception by the people of Iran. Tagore rightly guessed that there was a special reason for this. To these people he was not just a distinguished poet but a poet whom they could claim as their own as he belonged to Asia and, therefore, could take pride in his achievements. They also looked upon him as an Indo-Aryan who could claim descent from the same common stock from which the Indo-Iranians were descended. They also claimed him, therefore, as one tied to them by a kinship of blood.**

On his way back, Tagore paid a flying visit to Iraq, the land of the Abbaside Khalifs. He returned home *via* Baghdad in June 1932.

After that, Tagore was persuaded to undertake only one journey abroad. This was a short journey by sea to Ceylon which started

**Russiar Chithi*—5.

***Parashya*

in May 1934 and lasted about a month. Apart from giving addresses Tagore also held an exhibition of his paintings at Colombo. The people, being culturally akin to Indians and considering him as one of their own, gave him a warm reception.

The journey to Colombo was the last undertaken abroad by Tagore. He was then seventy-three years old. After that, his infirmity compelled him to discontinue such programmes.

XII

EDUCATIONIST AND SOCIAL WORKER

HERE WERE two factors that impelled Tagore to turn an educationist. Firstly, his son having attained the stage when regular education in school became a necessity and his own bitter experience of school life urged him to provide a new type of school for his son. Secondly, he had felt an inner urge to occupy himself in some disinterested service as a necessary phase through which he should spiritually realise himself. The two urges thus combined together to impel him to take the decision of establishing a school at Santiniketan.

So the school was established in 1901 and slowly it attained stability and a reputation of its own. It was residential in character and more or less modelled after the schools in the ancient forest settlements of India. The time, therefore, came at about the middle of the second decade of the current century when it was ready for further growth. Having attained steady growth on secure foundation, it was in a position to take the load of a superstructure. The question was what shape the superstructure should take.

This was answered by Tagore himself in due time. He had by then attained world-wide reputation as one of the leading figures of the world. His spiritual attainments and fascinating personality had won him the right to be heard by people of foreign countries. Through a combination of all these qualifications, he naturally fitted into the role of the spiritual ambassador of India. Invitations were extended to him from different countries and he was expected to deliver lectures in course of his tours. As he had assimilated Indian culture to a degree few had done, those who attended them heard in them the message of India. It was not at all difficult for

them to realise that he was speaking to them as “the spokesman of India and the living symbol of her culture.”*

They not only realised that he was discharging the self-imposed duty of carrying the message of India to the other countries but they also became fully alive to its needs and appreciated how effectively he could play his role. This will be borne out by the following extract taken from the same source:

“Dr. Tagore imposed upon himself the mission of interpreting the soul of India to the rest of the world, carrying with him the story of her great and magnificent past—her achievements in art, philosophy and ethics as his country’s gifts to the other parts of the world he was visiting.”**

Tagore himself became aware that his lectures were being increasingly appreciated abroad and was also able to realise that the warm reception accorded to him during such tours was inspired by the fact that through him they were hearing the voice of India. The ovation he received was not to him but to the spiritual heritage of India represented by him. It was from this awareness that the idea struck him that there was hunger for knowledge of the spiritual wealth of India outside his country.

This realisation in its turn set him to think that as the demand was more or less of a permanent character, there should be some institution to take over the function he was discharging on a permanent footing. It was this idea that led him to decide that the institution at Santiniketan should take on the shape of a specialised type of University. This will be born out by the following observation of his:

“Those who have honoured me have actually offered respect to India through me. This should not stop when I shall cease to live, because the respect shown to me is not linked with me personally. By accepting the Visva Bharati, you have taken over charge of giving expression to the undying spiritual character. of India.***

**Lectures and Addresses*, Introduction, compiled by Macmillan & Co.

***Lectures and Addresses*, Introduction, compiled by Macmillan & Co.

***Visva-Bharati, 12

It appears that this thought became uppermost in Tagore's mind towards the end of the first World War. Before that, he had already some experience of his tours abroad, having visited the United Kingdom and the United States in 1912 and Japan and the States again in 1916. Presumably the idea of converting his institution at Santiniketan into a special type of University had struck his mind shortly after that.

It was very clear to him that to suit the special role to be taken up by this new University, it should make a departure from the usual type. Having given thought to this aspect of the question, he came to evolve some broad principles which he thought should be adopted as guide-lines for the purpose of drawing up the plan.

As the primary function of the proposed University was to present to the outside world the representative learning of India, it should provide for facilities for a comprehensive study of the same. He thought that Indian learning had developed through different phases on basis of distinct cultures. These in his enumeration are the Vedic, the Puranic, the Buddhist, the Jain, the Islamic, the Sikh and the Zoroastrian culture.* Evidently, he wanted the list to be as comprehensive as possible so that even the youngest cultural group should not be omitted. He desired that knowledge of all these component elements of Indian culture should be made available from the proposed institution.

Evidently, Tagore's objective was that there should be one specific institution where the composite culture of India could be presented to the outsider. He had great admiration for India's cultural heritage and sincerely felt that there was genuine desire for contact with it on the side of educated people outside. It was India's duty therefore, to send to the outside world an invitation for taking a share of her culture and the proposed University could take upon itself this specific function.

Tagore's main objective is clearly indicated in the name he proposed for the new University, namely, 'Visva-Bharati'. It appears that in coining this new term, he was inspired by the Vedic phrase

**The Centre of Indian Culture*

Yatra Viswam Bhavatyekanidam, which means that it is a place where the entire world nestles together. His idea was that the new institution should be so developed that people from different parts of the world would be attracted to it for exchange of the spiritual wealth.* The following quotation from his observations will clearly bear this out:

“Universities should never be made into mechanical organisations for collecting and distributing knowledge. Through them, the people should offer their intellectual hospitality, their wealth of mind to others, and claim their proud right in return, to receive gifts from the rest of the world.”**

The next subject that engaged Tagore’s attention was what should be the contents of education. The objective of education he thought should be to make the whole nature of man articulate. Secondly, it should enable the student to express himself fully. This he thought could only be achieved by a system of education which would develop not only his intellectual faculty, but his emotional faculty as well. The student should be encouraged to develop simultaneously the capacity to express his thoughts through the language of words which is the language of the intellect as well as his emotions through the medium of their own specific languages. These other languages according to him are “the languages of lines and colours, sounds and movements.”*** In other words, drawing and painting, music and dance are according to him, the language of emotion.

He thus thought that to develop man’s personality, an ideal educational system should not only provide food for the intellect but also food for the development of emotions. He noted with regret however, that in Western Universities “it is the intellectual training which receives almost exclusive emphasis.” Whether it is Science or Humanities or Technology, they provide training for the intellect, leaving severely in neglect the emotional faculty. Incidentally, training in fine arts not only develops the emotional faculty but

**Visva-Bharati*, 12

***An Eastern University*

****Ibid*

helps the student to acquire power of expression through other medium than the language of words and thereby helps understand man better through other aspects of life. He, therefore, thought that subjects under the fine arts group should not merely be given a nod of recognition by universities but be assigned a place of honour like Science or Humanities. In other words, subjects of both groups should be included in the course of studies. The following quotation will show how pronounced his views were on the subject:

“The great use of education is not merely to collect facts but to know man and to make oneself known to man. It is the duty of every human being to master at least to some extent, not only the language of intellect but also that of personality which is the language of Art.”*

In the same vein, he further observed that to be brought up in ignorance of the language of art was to be deprived of the knowledge and use of the great inheritance of humanity. Consistently with this view, he desired that this proposed university should provide for facilities for teaching of subjects under the fine arts group. He said with profound seriousness that “music and the fine arts are among the highest means of national self-expression without which people remain inarticulate.”**

Thirdly, he deplored the fact that educational institutions not unoften, tend to become mere centres for distribution of knowledge. That was however, to his mind only a minor function for them and rather the major function should be the creation of knowledge. Scholars who have a creative turn of mind should be brought and offered facilities to develop their talents so that they can create new knowledge. Students brought in close contact with this type of teachers will imbibe their spirit and in their turn themselves be able to draw the necessary inspiration to create knowledge themselves.***

Lastly, he felt that an educational institution should not live in isolation separated from its geographical and social surroundings.

**An Eastern University*

***The Centre of Indian Culture*

****Visva-Bharati*

It should be organically linked up with the social and economic system of the locality in which it has been placed. Technical knowledge acquired in the institution should be applied to the local areas to promote economic well-being of its people. This will help the institution to find a place in the centre of the life of the people and become organically linked with it.

These were in brief the general principles which were adopted for giving shape to the proposed University. Work started briskly on the project in December 1918. Tagore persuaded his son Rathindranath to take up his residence permanently at Santiniketan to share the new burden with his father. Consistent with his principles, he brought some distinguished creative thinkers round whom he hoped a new atmosphere would be created. The celebrated Sanskrit scholar, Bidhu Shekhar Sastri took over charge of Sanskrit, Pali and Prakrit. A learned man from Ceylon came to take up teaching of Buddhist culture. Kshitimohan Sen came to take over charge of old Hindi literature.

As regards fine arts, particular attention was paid to painting and music. For looking after painting, he got two of the most promising painters of those days who had received their training from Abanindranath Tagore, the founder of Bengal School of Painting. They were Nandalal Bose and Surendranath Kar.

For teaching music, he brought Bhim Sastri and Nakuleswar Banerjee of the Bishnupur School of Music both of whom were well grounded in classical music.

By this time, Tagore's own songs had established a reputation of their own not only for their distinctive character but for their aesthetic quality as well. It had consequently, deservedly gained immense popularity in Bengal. To meet popular demand, therefore, provision had to be made for teaching Tagore songs also at Santiniketan. In this matter Tagore was very lucky to get a man with a finely developed sense of music who was no other than his own grand-nephew Dinendranath Tagore who had a prodigious memory for tunes. Once he heard somebody sing, a song he was able to reproduce it to a degree of perfection and could also put it to notation from memory.

This peculiar capacity not only qualified Dinendranath to be a good teacher of music, but also enabled him to help Tagore in setting to music his own songs. Tagore was very fastidious about the music of his songs, because he was guided in this matter by certain principles of his own. He, therefore, insisted on setting to music himself all the songs he composed. This self-imposed task Tagore did achieve, thanks to his extraordinary capacity for hard work. Having regard to the fact that the number of songs he composed would approximate 2000, it must be considered a prodigious feat by itself. In this matter Dinendranath gave him most effective assistance. Tagore had a bad memory for notations and could not remember the composition he made for a particular song accurately. For purpose of reproduction of his song after being set to music and notation, therefore, he had to depend on his grand-nephew. Once the song was set to music by the poet, Dinendranath would take over the task of retaining it in his memory and then recording its notations. Without his assistance, therefore, Tagore's songs could never have been recorded in a permanent form. He appreciated the contribution of his nephew in this respect fully and so named him "the storekeeper of all his songs and their guardian angel". This complement he fully deserved.

With the groundwork thus prepared, Tagore decided to declare the University open through a formal ceremony. For this, December 22, 1921, corresponding to the Bengali Pous 8, 1328, was selected, this being the anniversary day when his father embraced the Brahma faith. Dr. Brojendranath Seal, the distinguished philosopher presided over the function. Professor Sylvan Levi attended it. After that, he stayed there to deliver a series of lectures. It was under his direction that a scheme for study of the Chinese language and literature was adopted. In a solemn speech befitting the occasion, Tagore handed over the charge of the University to a Board and along with that, made a gift of the landed properties to the institution. He also transferred the copyright of his books written up to that date to the University so that the royalty earned by them could provide the nucleus of a recurring income to meet its financial liabilities.

Consistent with his idea that an educational institution should become a part of the local life by involving itself in welfare activities in surrounding areas, Tagore also decided to open a rural welfare section of this University. With this end in view, he acquired some properties in a village called Surul located only 3 km away from Santiniketan and opened a rural welfare department in the same year he formally opened his university and named it *Sriniketan* which means the abode of wealth. The idea was that this complementary institution should look after the material well-being of the surrounding villages.

In developing this institution, Tagore was ably assisted by an idealist young Englishman named Leonard Elmhirst to whom we had occasion to refer in an earlier chapter. Elmhirst had visited India in 1915 and had also read Tagore's *Gitanjali*. Tagore met him in New York in course of his visit in 1920 where the latter was undergoing training in Agronomy. Tagore at once developed a liking for him and on impulse asked him to accompany him to India, straight away to develop his rural institution. Elmhirst however, was keen to finish his training first and so promised to visit Sriniketan after that. True to his word he sent by wire to Tagore after the completion of his training in 1921 this message: "Study is finished. Can I come?" Now, Tagore was just then facing financial difficulties and finding it impossible to undertake the consequent financial responsibility, wired back to say, "Do not come; no funds available."

This not only shows how sincerely frank Tagore was, but brought about a reaction on the part of Elmhirst which gives a deep insight into the fine qualities of his character. Unavailability of funds was no deterrent to Elmhirst who did come to Tagore in spite of the warning and undertook to defray all the expenses. Thanks to the generous help he received from his friend, Mrs. Straight, he financed his own scheme.

The limitation of funds did not allow Tagore to operate on a big field which he least regretted, for he knew that it was the quality of work that counted and not the quantity. He, therefore, decided that the scheme should function like a pilot project to

initiate experiments and study results to find out solutions for problems of rural areas. "A lighted lamp, "he said, "is for us the end, not a lamp of gold."

While entrusting the implementation of the scheme to Elmhirst, Tagore very properly did not impose any preconceived programme of action. That did not, however, prevent him from taking two important decisions touching on policy which show what deep insight he had developed about the character of the rural people of India.

Should rural reconstruction work be sustained through outside help, was a broad question which had to be settled. Tagore's reply to this was emphatically on the negative, for he felt that "any effort to enrich a village from outside is artificial."* Continuing in the same vein, he argued: "It amounts to being charitable to the present by robbing the future. It is possible even in a desert to strike a fountain that can replenish itself. Such a fountain never dries up."**

He also took the decision that the approach to the rural problems should be integrated and not piecemeal. This was peculiarly his own concept. It is to be integrated not in the ordinary sense that all important problems of rural life should be tackled together, but in the sense that it should call out the best efforts of the whole man. He also felt that the rural worker should not only use his intellect and his hands and apply his technical knowledge, but he should also feel interested emotionally in his work. He, therefore, observed:

"Welfare of the community is a combination of many components. They are intimately linked up with one another. If any one of them is kept separate, we miss the result. Only when health, intellect, knowledge, work and feeling of enjoyment are mixed up together, man's welfare attains fulfilment."***

With these general points as guiding principles, Elmhirst carried on very interesting experiments in rural reconstruction in the group of villages surrounding Sriniketan. In the process, he evolved

*Inaugural address of the Silpa Bhandar at Sriniketan

**Ibid

***Kalantar, *Swaraj Sadhan*

an effective programme for rural development and also developed a method which in many ways anticipated the Community Development Programme introduced in our country several years after as a part of the First Five Year Plan under the direct supervision of the Planning Commission. A brief reference to the points of similarity will repay our efforts by bringing into relief the special points of excellence in Tagore's programme.

The Programme adopted by the Planning Commission has three broad features: (1) It is a multipurpose programme providing for simultaneous activities in different sectors of rural life; (2) It is meant to be purely a self-help programme where the rural people are expected to be encouraged to solve their problems exclusively through their own efforts with the minimum of technical and other assistance from outside; (3) The special method adopted for rural improvement by persuading the people to adopt improved practices after being satisfied about their effectiveness, better known by its technical name as the Extension Service.

Elmhirst's experiments yielded results which anticipated all these features. The general principles adopted by Tagore referred to earlier will show that the first two features had been anticipated through them. Thus, Tagore wanted that rural development programme should be executed through the people's own efforts both individually and collectively and no help should be made available from outside. Secondly, the multipurpose character that Tagore wanted to impart to his programme was wider in scope than that adopted by the Planning Commission. Tagore's scheme recognised the fact that to get the best return for voluntary action, it was necessary to link it up with our emotional faculty. It should be inspired by a feeling of love for the people one serves or as an expression of piety. Tagore desired that social work should be taken up in this spirit. He even organised bands of volunteers whom he named Bratidals which connotes that the group is interested in undertaking its work in a spirit of seriousness and respect for the people to be benefited.

The Extension method is distinguished by the features that it maintains a close link between the laboratory and the field workers

for providing technical knowledge to the latter. It gets the problem from the farmer, places it before the technical men who work out its solution in the laboratory and then takes the technical knowledge to the farmer for its application. Elmhirst's experiments also evolved a similar method.*

In this manner grew up a programme which provided for improvement in agricultural practices, resuscitation of cottage industries, adult literacy, co-operative banking and medical service through co-operatives as a part of the educational programme of his University. This is the lamp that Tagore lit to inspire people in rural reconstruction work. It was the first pioneering effort on the line and achieved no mean result.

**Rabi Pradakshin*, Edited by Charu Chandra Bhattacharyya, page 144

XIII

AS PAINTER

IN MY CASE”, Tagore said, “my pictures did not have their origin in trained discipline, in tradition and deliberate attempt at illustration, but in my instinct for rhythm and my pleasure in the harmonious combination of lines and colours.”*

This gives in a nutshell the story of Tagore’s entry in the field of arts. Preoccupied from his early teens with his favourite pastime of writing poetry, he never found leisure to undergo training in painting. Not that the necessary incentive was lacking in the family atmosphere. His elder brother Jyotirindranath was deeply interested in drawing portraits of the family members. The two brothers were very intimate and associated together, very closely, in practising music, but this example did not attract him to this “language of the lines and colours”.

At a subsequent stage, his nephew Abanindranath, who was ten years his junior, founded the Bengal School of Art. It was located in the common compound of the two branches of the Tagore family. Abanindranath’s studio became the hub of an artistic group in which foreign artists of distinction also participated. These activities, however, failed to attract Tagore.

The reason is not far to seek. Tagore had by then become more deeply involved in literary activities which covered all branches of what De Quincey called “the literature of power”. Moreover, Tagore had interested himself seriously in educational activities at his rural settlement at Santiniketan. As later events proved, he did not lack in interest or even skill so far as painting was concerned. What prevented him from attending to it was his preoccupation, principally with literature and, to some extent, his educational activities.

**Chitralipi*, Vol. 2—My Pictures.

Towards the late sixties of his life, the urge for giving himself up to the service of painting proved so strong that he had to yield. He had to wait so long because the urge had to grow strong enough to assert its claim. Not that this new love displaced altogether his literary activities. They continued to engage his attention but did not monopolise it. In consequence, we find that in his late sixties and early seventies, painting became increasingly an absorbing pastime for him.

These facts also explain why Tagore failed to give himself any routine training to be able to acquire the necessary skills for adopting this new medium for self-expression. When he could give some time to the subject, he had outgrown the stage for receiving such training. It was well that things turned out to be so, because this enabled him to start on his new experiment with an altogether independent mind, unfettered by any traditional line of approach. Perhaps Tagore's paintings owe their unique quality, in not conforming to any traditional pattern, to his inability, in earlier age, to undergo regular training.

This is the history of Tagore's artistic activity. Authors have many occasions to make corrections in their manuscripts by way of revision. In his early age, Tagore used to make such corrections in the ordinary way, applying the blue pencil to the rejected parts. From 1924 onwards, however, such corrections received an undue share of his attention*. He could not stand the unsymmetrical look of his corrections and increasingly felt an urge to give them a significant shape.

He says: "When the scratches in my manuscripts cried, like sinners, for salvation, and assailed my eyes with the ugliness of their irrelevance, I often took more time in restoring them into a merciful finality of rhythm than in carrying on what was my obvious task."**

This account shows that the artist in him was awakening. How were his first efforts in painting? Peculiar configurations took

**Prithwis Neogy: Drawings and Paintings of Rabindranath* "Centenary Volume of Sahitya Akademi"

***Calcutta Municipal Gazette*—Tagore Memorial Special Supplement

shape, which mostly carried no meaning, excepting the rhythmic quality of their shapes. Sometimes, they assumed strange forms taking after mythical beasts or even pre-historic birds or reptiles. These products were evidently abstract in character.

At a subsequent stage, both the technique and the character of the paintings underwent a change. Having had no training in handling a brush, Tagore adopted most unusual methods in his early drawings and paintings. At first, the only materials readily available were pen and ink. They became his only tools for drawing. When he felt the need for covering a surface with ink, he would use the blunt end of his pen. At a later stage, he used finger-tips or even rags to spread the ink in two-tone drawings. It was at a still later stage that he started using crayon and brush with regular paints.*

As his technique improved, the paintings also took on a different character. From abstract configurations and shapes, suggesting imaginary beasts and birds, emerged new forms and shapes which had a realistic colouring. Faces of women, masks, gesticulating figures and human forms, suggesting thoughts and ideas, took shape. The trend was towards taking a realistic shape. At a later stage, landscape paintings occupied a position of importance. In such paintings, not unoften, a brilliant afternoon sky glowing with a golden yellow hue, stood sharply against silhouetted shapes of trees.

A hooded female head with oval face, sharp aquiline nose and vivid eye, deserves special attention. It became a recurrent theme in his painting. Its frequent appearance even provoked speculations as to who the model of these paintings could be. It appears that the question was posed to the poet by the famous artist, Nandalal Bose. In reply, he is reported to have stated that the hooded female face with glowing eyes, might have been unconsciously modelled after his deceased sister-in-law, Kadambari Devi, whose facial image he carried in his memory.

We quote below his words: "The look of the eyes of *Nutan Bowthan* have become so deeply imprinted in my mind that I can never forget about them and when I paint portraits, not unoften,

*Prithwis Neogy: *Drawings and Paintings of Rabindranath*

her glowing eyes present themselves before my sight. Probably that is why the eyes in my portraits take after her eyes.”*

We can draw two conclusions. It shows, firstly, that the poet never drew from living models, after the fashion of traditional Indian art. Secondly, it shows the deep affection he used to bear for this particular sister-in-law.

That Tagore carried even in old age, a vivid memory of her hooded face is also confirmed by his verses, written at that period of his life when childhood reminiscences not infrequently provided the theme for his poems. The lines that follow are an example. In them he recalls an evening scene on the roof of their ancestral house at Jorasanko.

Supporting his violin on his shoulder
 my brother would practice tunes
 on it inspired by the evening star
 on the roof top,

When after finishing my English lessons
 I would report myself to my sister-in-law
 whose face was hooded by
 the skirt of her red bordered sari**

It appears that Tagore vigorously pursued his new hobby for the remaining part of his life.

During the period from 1928 which is the date when he seriously took up painting, to 1940, he produced about two thousand paintings. The Visva-Bharati has brought out two volumes giving prints of his paintings under the title *Chitralipi*. These volumes altogether contain 33 reproductions. Of them, the reproductions in the first volume bear special significance. Each painting carries a comment by Tagore with its English rendering done by himself. These comments, besides helping us to understand the particular painting, also show whether any of them is expected to carry any idea. In that way, they throw a lot of light on the question of his theory of painting.

*Manoranjan Gupta: *Rabindranath Chittrakola*,

**Charar Chabi—Balak

By way of introduction to that, a few items may be conveniently referred to here. Representation No. 17 of this volume shows a man sitting on the back of a giant reptile. Evidently, this gives expression to one of Tagore's favourite thoughts that evolution takes a significant form in man where the mind is expected to solve his problems, through application of intelligence, rather than through gigantic bodily growth, as in prehistoric reptiles, which chains life to an imperfect mind.*

The last reproduction in this volume showing two flowers peeping through a crevice, in a paved area, implies that "stupid stones" could not stifle Earth's voice. This also gives expression to another thought of his which deprecates modern man's unbalanced urbanised way of living, banishing Nature from his life. The Poet pleads for a return to the natural life of old days, untarnished by the touch of excessive technological development. It may be mentioned here that in one of his symbolic dramas, bearing the title *Raktakarabi* (Red Oleander), this idea forms the main theme.

This type of painting is miles apart from what goes by the name of abstract art. Such paintings are really lyrics written in colour and line and give expression to elevating thoughts. They bear comparison to the paintings of Watts who utilised this medium similarly. We may refer to his famous painting "Love and Life" or "Hope". The only difference is that while Watts used the realistic style characteristic of classical European art, Tagore used his own style, where an extreme economy of lines and colours is maintained.

In this matter, Tagore follows the Indian tradition, as Nandalal Bose has pointed out.** Indian painters never cared for representing depth through subtle application of colours but were quite satisfied with filling surfaces with one-tone colours to represent contours. In fact, Tagore carried on this spirit further to economise use of lines and colours. For example, to represent human figures, he would not even care to draw eyes and nose and lips to depict a face, but would indicate an oval surface only, leaving the rest to

**Religion of Man—The Creative Spirit*

**Nandalal Bose: *Gurudever Anka Chhabi*

be imagined by the connoisseur. That is the reason why Nandalal Bose observed that in such cases Tagore's paintings and drawings "are real without being realistic."*

This brings us face to face with an interesting aspect of his paintings. While his drawings and paintings started on an abstract note at the time of their first appearance, they gradually tended to express ideas; in other words, they shed their abstract character at a subsequent phase. Tagore's own impression was that when he took up painting, he had no intention of using it as a medium for the expression of his thoughts. This is understandable because the very circumstances under which his paintings took birth left no scope for his art to develop on other lines. He was at the initial stage impelled by the pure desire of giving a rhythmic shape to his corrections which would have otherwise offended his aesthetic sense. "I try", he says, "to make my corrections dance, connect them in a rhythmic relationship and transform accumulation into adornment."**

Very probably this initial experience led him to formulate his own aesthetic theory of painting, showing a clear preference for abstract art. The following observation of his will bear this out:

"People often ask me about the meaning of my pictures. I remain silent even as my pictures are. It is for them to express and not to explain. They have nothing ulterior behind their own appearance for the thoughts to explore and words to describe and if that appearance carries its ultimate worth then they remain, otherwise they are rejected and forgotten even though they may have some scientific truth or ethical justification."***

His initial experience would have certainly justified such a theory. Oriented to this view, he thought he could clearly distinguish poetry from painting. While poetry demands that the expression used should carry meaning, painting is not bound to do so and it has the liberty to produce forms which need not

*Nandalal Bose : *Gurulever Anka Chhabi*

***Chitralipi*, Vol. 2—My Pictures

****Ibid*

necessarily function as the medium of expression of ideas and sentiments. This view is repeated in one of his poems which records his attitude to the subject.

Translation of the relevant-part is given below:

I have been trapped by the charms of painting.
 Literature is a rich man's daughter
 And brings a lot of money (meaning) with her;
 Given to talking a lot, a good deal of
 thinking is necessary to keep her pleased.
 Painting on the other hand, is reticent,
 and carries no meaning.
 My dealings with her are not motivated by
 a purpose.*

The original Bengali is couched in such language that it becomes extremely difficult to render it into English. In the original, there is a clear use of a pun, namely *artha*, which stands for both money and meaning, which makes the rendering particularly difficult.

Be that as it may, the sense is that poetry is "garrulous and always carries meaning", while painting is reticent and does not feel inclined to "talk".

Not that Tagore overlooked the fact that paintings also "talk" and depict ideas or sentiments. On further deliberation, he thought that the trend of painting was to drop its role as a carrier of meanings and ideas and to develop on abstract lines. In other words, although at the initial stage it assumes a representational character, it tends to become abstract. He thinks that, that way lies its path of development and by gaining the freedom that is allowed in abstract art, it can develop to perfection, by making configuration by itself a criterion of value.

In this matter, the Poet notes some points of similarity between music and painting. Music can be used as a medium of expression of feelings, but it has the rare capacity of growing and developing in isolation as abstract music, as in instrumental music, or the *alap*

**Shesh Saptak*, p. 16

type of songs in Indian classical music. He thinks that painting has a similar capacity to grow on abstract lines.

He develops his argument in support of this proposition thus:

“There can be no question that originally melody accompanied words, giving interpretations to the sentiments contained in them. But music threw off this bond of subservience and represented moods abstracted from words and characters that were indefinite. In fact, this liberated music does not acknowledge that feelings, which can be expressed in words, are essential for its purpose, though they may have their secondary place in musical structures. This right of independence has given music its greatness, and I suspect that evolution of pictorial and plastic art proceeds on this line, aiming to be freed from an absolute alliance with natural facts or incidents”.*

This is, however, an attitude which was contrary to his accepted views in respect of other arts, including even music. Having been a votary of creative literature most of his life, he had a partiality for an attitude which disliked abstract development, of any kind of art. According to him, an art object should have not only a body but also a soul; it should signify an idea or carry some sense, otherwise, it cannot attain organic unity which brings about the aesthetic emotion.

Admittedly, music has the capacity to develop on abstract lines like mathematics. Personally, however, Tagore did not like music to develop that way. He vehemently asserted his preference for the folk songs, as they are used for expression of ideas, to classical music, which tends to grow on abstract lines. According to him classical music places emphasis on the wrong point. Elaborate ornamentation in music, in his view, stifles thought, and so he compares it to overdressing a woman, neutralising her natural beauty without enhancing it.

He says:

“It is like wrapping up a slim beautiful woman in a thousand folds of skirt and scarf. The skirt may be very costly, but it ill

**Chitralipi*, Vol. 2-My Pictures

behoves it to dare to blanket her beauty. The reason for this strange perversity is that the master exponents hold the firm view that the main object of music is not to allow a song to express its own beauty but to raise a lot of froth through a vigorous display of tunes.”*

His own songs are inspired by an ideal where the emphasis is on the expression of theme rather than elaborate embellishment of the tunes. In fact, this is what actuated him to take the pains to set to music himself, all the two thousand and odd songs he composed. He was so keen that the tune, to which a song was to be set, should play a complementary role in bringing out the beauty of the thought and not dominate it, that he took particular care to avoid elaborately embellished tunes. In fact, this is what imparts to his music a distinctive quality. His own theory of music is thus contrary to the thought expressed with regard to painting.**

As regards dance also, his attitude was consistently against abstract development. He discarded the *Nritta* type of abstract dance as elaborated in Bharata's *Natyasastra* and showed a preference for the *Abhinaya* type of dance, which is termed *Nritya*. Here, dancing is used as a medium of expression of thought and sentiment and not as an abstract configuration of bodily movements.

This is borne out by the principles he laid down to produce his famous dance dramas in his seventies. In these productions, he used dance as a medium of expression of thought and sentiment. While the actors in these dramas played their parts, through bodily movements and gestures, to make their meaning more explicit, the Poet added songs to them, to be sung singly or in chorus as the occasion demanded from behind the stage. The gesture-language of bodily movements would thus be accompanied by the language of words set to music. Where the language of gestures failed, the language of words would take over and the two together would produce a heightened effect. The emphasis was thus clearly on the meaning. Its expression was sought to be given by the double

*Paraya

**Santidev Ghosh: *Rabindra Sangeet, Bharatiya Sangeete Gurudever Sthan*

medium of music and dance. Both were meant to play a complementary role to meaning.

It is remarkable that in respect of painting and drawing, Tagore entertained different ideas and thought that their natural path of evolution lay along abstract lines. Paradoxically enough, he failed to practise what he preached. His efforts to give a rhythmic shape to his corrections no doubt gave birth to an abstract type of painting, at the initial stage. They, however, slowly shed their abstract character and assumed a representational one. The portraits of faces and figures, suggesting some thoughts or moods, and the landscape paintings clearly belong to this class, while the fantastic shapes, which sometimes take after mythical dragons or prehistoric reptiles, indicate a transitional stage.

This paradox was bound to make its appearance, sooner or later, because Tagore's mental make-up was incompatible with an abstract theory of art. Through sheer force of habit and natural inclination, he was drawn away from what he consciously urged. No wonder, this brought about in his later paintings a wide gap between what he practiced and what he preached.

By 1930, Tagore had produced enough paintings to provide for a representative collection for the purpose of an exhibition. So, during his visit to Europe and America in that year, he struck upon the idea of holding exhibitions of his paintings in different cultural centres. Would the sensation created by the production of the English translation of his verses in 1912 be repeated? Nobody could be sure and Tagore had his own misgivings as he had no practical training on the subject. No wonder, he was hesitant and even apologetic. He selected Paris as the place for holding his first exhibition outside India, a compliment which was due by merit. The story has been told already about how two good friends, in the person of Madame Ocampo and Comtesse de Nuoy helped him to organise it at the Gallerie Pigalle.

The note written by him by way of introducing his paintings at the Exhibition begins with the following apology:

“An apology is due from me for my intrusion into the world of picture and thus offering a perfect instance to the saying that

those who do not know are apt to be rash where angels are timidly careful. I as an artist, cannot claim any merit for my courage; for it was the unconscious courage of the unsophisticated, like that of one who walks in dream on perilous paths, who is saved only because he is blind to the risk”.

But there was little need for such a timid appearance. Though untrained in the routine way, his innate sense of rhythm and mastery of calligraphy, which is much in evidence in his fine handwriting, enabled him to develop a technique which showed little sign of weakness. No wonder, his first exhibition in Paris was warmly appreciated and created quite a sensation in the artistic world of the West, which was to some degree comparable to the events of 1912.

In her introduction to the catalogue of exhibits at Galerie Pigalle, Comtesse de Nuoy correctly anticipated the reaction of the public by observing as follows:

“Tagore is timid before his creation, to the fineness and brilliance of which each one of us is a witness. We praise him quite naturally; as for him, he doubts, questions, hesitates and smiles.”

When his paintings were subsequently exhibited in Berlin, they were given an equally warm reception. The newspaper *Manheimer Tageblatt* observed that “Tagore showed an amazing taste in colours” and that his paintings are “full of rhythm and inner melody”.

The most comprehensive and perhaps accurate assessment, however, comes from the pen of the art critic, Joseph Southhall, following the exhibition of Tagore’s paintings in the Birmingham City Art Gallery. He not only notes the maturity of Tagore’s technique but, what is more important, also the spiritual qualities of his paintings, as the medium for the expression of ideas and sentiments. Evidently, he missed altogether, Tagore’s initial preference for development of his art on abstract lines, which soon made room for his normal attitude to art. This chapter may, therefore, fittingly end with a quotation from Southhall’s observation:

“Tagore’s drawings are, as I see them, the work of a powerful imagination, seeing things in hue and colour as the best Oriental sees them, with that sense of rhythm and pattern that we find in Persian or Indian textiles craftwork. The colour sense is indeed superb.

“But there is much more than this; there is a deep feeling and apprehension of the spiritual life and being of men and animals, expressed in their features, their movements, their outward forms, hues and colours.”*

*Manoranjan Gupta: *Rabindra Chitrakala*

XIV

THE LAST DAYS

WE HAVE NOW reached the closing chapter of Tagore's eventful life. Though endowed with an unusually robust health, his body could not stand the strain of vigorous activities after he had crossed his sixties. From the early seventies, he could not stand the strain of foreign tours and so they were discontinued from 1934, his visit to Ceylon being the last one undertaken by him. He found himself confined to his rural home in Santiniketan with occasional visits to his ancestral house in Calcutta. He would not undertake long journeys even within India unless he was forced to do so.

Although he found a new love in painting in his late sixties, it could not altogether displace from his mind his first love which was literary activity. Poetry still continued to enjoy the pride of place. Out of twenty-four books produced during this period of his life, only three were novels. Of the remaining twenty-one, three were dance dramas, one symbolic drama and the rest were all books of poems. This shows his partiality for poetry as medium of self-expression.

As regards his poetry, a departure was noticeable both in respect of the style and to a lesser degree the contents. As regards style it discarded decorative aids like metres and figures of speech. The old scheme of elaborate metres slowly disappeared. There was less attraction for imparting euphonic quality by deliberate selection of words with a view to producing pleasant sound effects. His attraction for figures of speech with high imaginative overtones was less in evidence. On the whole, there was distinct indication of a preference for a simple style. On the other hand, as compensation for that, the contents became more weighty by contrast with earlier writings, a preference being shown both for serious

subjects and depth in thought. In short, while the form became simple, the content gained by weightiness and depth.

Tagore himself became aware of the transformation his poetical compositions underwent in his old age. Having regard to their specific features, he compared them to the harvest of his mature age as contrasted with his earlier writings which he compared to flowers of spring.* Indeed the comparison is very apt. While the flowers of spring charm our heart more by their external form, the fruits of autumn carry worth in substance. In these later writings there is no urge to charm the heart of the readers through beauty of expression so much as to stir their minds by deep and lofty thoughts.

Occasionally, the urge to discard the beauty of the outer form proved so strong that Tagore adopted the rhythm of prose-poems for his verses. This came easy to him as he had a foretaste for the same when he translated his Bengali poems for his English *Gitanjali* in 1912. In 1922, he brought out a book bearing the title *Lipika*, a collection of allegorical stories. They had a lyrical quality of their own which made them extremely suitable for treatment in poetry. The compositions, however, were not arranged in the form of poems. But for this, they could have been treated as prose-poems. These compositions, therefore, mark the second phase through which his prose-poems passed. In the last phase, collections of true prose-poems made their appearance. As many as three such collections were published between 1932 and 1936. They were distinctly the fruits of his old age.**

As regards contents also some new features made their appearance. Reminiscences of childhood became understandably an attractive theme for his poems. No wonder we find many poems recollecting his childhood experiences in the different collections.

A departure both in respect of technique and content was also noticeable during this phase. Tagore started experiments in writ-

*Introduction to *Nabajatak*

**The names of the collections are *Punascha* (1932), *Shesh Saptak*, (1935) and *Shyamali* (1936)

ings what may be placed under the category of nonsense verse as known in English literature. Here we get rhymed words but the different parts do not produce a coherent sense.

In 1932, Tagore once again became involved in the political events of the country under very dramatic circumstances. It was the extreme seriousness of the affair that dragged him into it. The stake was nothing less than the life of Mahatma Gandhi who was at that time in Poona jail. The British government was bent on providing separate electorate for the scheduled castes among Hindus with the obvious intention of splitting up the Hindu community. Mahatma Gandhi lodged a strong protest against it, but unfortunately, this failed to produce any result. Gandhiji, now, thought of undertaking a fast unto death on this issue. But before taking a final decision, he considered it necessary to consult Rabindranath Tagore, who not only commanded his respect but could also be relied on for wise counsel. He loved to call Rabindranath his Gurudev.

The fast was due to start from the noon of September 20, 1932. Gandhiji had sent a letter to Tagore earlier asking for his approval. The latter sent him in reply a wire communicating his consent. He said that it was worth sacrificing his (Gandhiji's) "precious life for the sake of India's unity and her social integrity". He, however, expressed the "fervent hope" that people would "not callously allow such national tragedy to reach its extreme length".

Unfortunately, the wire sent by Tagore did not reach him in time and so in the early morning of 20th September, Gandhiji decided to start his fast in anticipation of Tagore's blessings. But before doing so, he addressed a letter to Tagore which shows how desperately he felt the need for taking his counsel. After addressing Tagore as Gurudev, the letter runs as follows:

"This is early morning, 3 o'clock of Tuesday, I enter the fiery gate at noon. If you can bless the effort, I want it. You have been to me a true friend because you have been a candid friend after speaking your thoughts aloud. I shall look forward to a firm opinion from you one way or the other. But you have refused to

criticise. Though it can now only be during my fast, I will yet prize your criticism if your heart condemns my action. I am not too proud to make an open confession of my blunder, whatever the cost of confession, if I find myself in error. If your heart approves of the action, I want your blessing. It will sustain me.”

Luckily, Tagore’s telegraphic message communicating his approval reached Gandhiji before he started his fast. He had, therefore, the satisfaction of knowing that his best friend would be spiritually with him to sustain him in the midst of the storm he was about to enter.

Luckily again, the fast did not end in tragedy. Gandhiji’s firm stand ultimately brought good sense to the powers that be and they relented. The move to provide separate electorate for the scheduled caste Hindus was dropped. The decision was communicated to Gandhiji on September 26, 1932, six days after the fast had started. Tagore had in the meantime come over to Poona to be near Gandhiji in his hour of need and so the fast could be broken in his presence.

This episode shows how their mutual affection ripened into deep friendship and how they cared for each other. There was another development a few years later which showed how much Gandhiji cared for the health and comfort of Gurudev.

By the middle of the thirties, the financial condition of Visva-Bharati deteriorated very much. Tagore could not expect any financial assistance from the alien Government which had become alienated from him when he renounced his knighthood. No doubt some assistance used to come from the Princes of the feudatory states, but it was more or less of a marginal character. Tagore had to depend mainly on his own personal resources for financing his University. These were the royalty from his books, the income from his landed property and proceeds from his lecture tours abroad. Due to general recession, however, the collections from his estates had fallen down while due to infirmity and age, he could no more undertake strenuous journeys abroad. Two main resources having thus dried up, Tagore faced the serious problem of finding new methods for financing his institution.

Faced with the task of raising funds for his University, Tagore's inventive mind solved it in a new way. He conceived the idea of staging dance-dramas with the help of his students in different parts of India and raising funds by sale of tickets for admission to such performances. In the process, was born a new type of dance which developed such distinctive features of its own as to justify the claim for recognition as a new school of dancing.

It was indeed a pity that Tagore had to take recourse to this method of raising funds. It meant considerable strain on his aging body.

It was in the year 1936, after having covered the cities of Patna, Allahabad and Lahore in his itinerary, Tagore went to Delhi to stage the next performance. This naturally attracted the attention of Gandhiji who protested against Gurudev undertaking such tours on grounds of health. On finding out the reason which compelled Tagore to do so at considerable personal discomfort, he raised a purse of Rs. 60,000 and requested Tagore to give up his tour and return to Santiniketan. Tagore complied after giving only one more performance at Meerut to which he had already committed himself.

Gandhiji paid his visit to Santiniketan on February 17, 1941. Tagore's health had in the meantime broken down. Naturally, he was very much worried about the future of his University. It pained him to think of the insecure future which stared the institution in the face—the institution which he had built up with so much care over a period of nearly forty years of his life. Having regard to his state of health, he thought it was time to speak out his worries to his best friend and so, he took advantage of this opportunity to commend to Gandhiji's care his University for maintenance in future. This request bore fruit in the fullness of time. When India attained independence, its first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who was himself a great admirer of Tagore, had an Act passed to adopt Visva-Bharati as one of the Central universities.

In the last decade of Tagore's life, a warm friendship grew up between him and his younger contemporary Subhas Chandra Bose,

who was destined to become the beloved Netaji of his country by building up the Indian National Army and leading it in a war of independence. Tagore learnt to admire Subhas Chandra's manly qualities which prompted the latter again and again to defy the mighty challenge of British imperialism at its worst. It was not an unusual sight to see Subhas Chandra pay visits to Tagore when he would stay at his ancestral house at Jorasanko.

On one occasion, a visit was even arranged for Subhas Chandra to Santiniketan in January, 1939. Tagore so much admired him as the symbol of the spirit of defiant youth that he decided to give Subhas Chandra a fitting reception and even wrote out an address to be read out on the occasion. Unfortunately, for some reason or other, this visit did not materialise, but the address written for him has been luckily preserved. The first few lines of the same quoted below, will show what high sentiments Tagore used to entertain for his young friend:

“As Bengal's poet, I invite you to the honoured seat of the leader of the people. We have the sacred assurance of the Gita that from time to time the Divine Champion of the good arises to challenge the reign of evil.”

Evidently, Tagore was quite willing to place Subhas Chandra in the pedestal of such champion.

Such love cannot go unreciprocated. In fact, Subhas Chandra responded with a deep warmth of feeling to such gestures of affection. He hailed Tagore as the poet of humanity who had inspired youth to fight for great causes through his pen.

Subhash Chandra requested Tagore to lay the foundation stone of Mahajati Sadan, a building to be utilised for public purpose. In spite of his failing health, Tagore agreed to do so. Speaking on the occasion, Subhas Chandra paid an ovation to Tagore in these words, “With the voice of eternity you, Sir, have all along given passionate expression to the hopes and aspirations of our regenerate nation. Yours has been the message of undying youth. You have not only written poetry and produced art, but you have also lived poetry and art. You are not only India's poet but you are also the poet of humanity.”

Later, during the Second World War, when Subhas Chandra founded the Free India League in Berlin, it was decided at his instance to adopt *Jana-gana-mana*, the song composed by Tagore on India, as the National Anthem. It was at his instance that it was played on the Orchestra for the first time in a ceremony in Hamburg in 1942.

In his old age, Tagore developed a special attraction for Kalimpong, a hill station in Darjeeling district of West Bengal which has reputation for its mild climate. Scenic beauty of the place might have been another attraction. Its lush green foliage and the rushing water of the Teesta which flows by through a gorge before debouching into the plains of North Bengal are some of its charming features. He would stay here during the summer and the autumn for rest and recoupment of health.

Near Kalimpong is situated the Government Cinchona Plantation with its headquarters at a place called Maungpu. Maitreyee Devi, wife of Dr. Manmohan Sen, Chemist of the Plantation, had become the object of special affection of Tagore. Naturally, therefore, when she sent him an invitation to stay in the settlement, he could not refuse and in 1938 spent two months in the idyllic surroundings of this small station. The care and attention bestowed on him by his young hostess proved an additional attraction. No wonder, Tagore became fond of the place and paid more visits to it. The last visit took place in the summer of 1940 when his birth anniversary, which usually falls on the 8th of May, was celebrated there.

Soon after, a ceremony was arranged at Santiniketan on August 7, 1940 at the instance of the Oxford University which deserves special mention. The same University had honoured him previously by inviting him to deliver the Hibbert lectures. This time, it decided to confer on him the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Literature. As Tagore's health would not permit him to undertake a journey to Oxford, it was arranged that the conferment should take place in a simple ceremony at the residence of Tagore at Santiniketan. Sir Maurice Gwyer, the then Chief Justice of India and an ex-student of the University, made over to him the degree.

Soon after this, Tagore's health started breaking down rapidly. His eye-sight became affected. He could hardly move about and had to be carried in a push-chair. During the autumn of 1940 he came over to his ancestral house in Calcutta and expressed a desire to visit Kalimpong. Although his physicians advised against it, his urge to visit the place proved so strong that he went there contravening the same. Unfortunately, the apprehension expressed by his physicians materialised for, after a few days' stay, he became so indisposed that he had to be brought back to Calcutta under medical supervision. After a course of treatment, he recovered sufficiently to be able to return to Santiniketan in November 1940.

His next birthday anniversary was celebrated with befitting solemnity at Santiniketan on May 8, 1941. On such occasion, it was customary for him to give a message either in the form of a poem or a speech. On this occasion, he delivered a written message which sounded very pessimistic. This pessimism stemmed from the world situation obtaining at the time with the major nations of the world engaged in carrying the deadly war of devastation with one another while others were threatened with involvement, sooner or later.

Indeed the fourth decade of the current century constituted the blackest page of history when militant nationalism assumed its ugliest shape throwing away all pretensions of practising culture and moral virtues. Not satisfied with the conquest of Korea and Manchuria, Japanese imperialism had started a relentless war to subjugate China. Mussolini, the Italian dictator, dreaming of imitating the role of ancient Roman emperors, started a war of conquest against Abyssinia, the only country still enjoying political independence in the African continent. In the mainland of Europe, Hitler was waging a war of conquest against his neighbours to establish the superiority of the German race. He had already overrun Poland and divided up its territory with Soviet Russia and not long after, France and the Netherlands had been conquered, while Great Britain was licking her wounds after withdrawing to the protection of her island home after the crushing defeat of its army and desperately trying to stave off a projected invasion.

With this gloomy background, Tagore naturally felt very much dejected. In this holocaust, he read the logical outcome of a pitiless and greedy nationalism which the Western powers had cultivated with avidity, taking advantage of their technological skill. In fact, he had gone through a similar painful experience during the First World War and did not hesitate to denounce this form of nationalism in course of his tours in the different parts of the world.

As early as 1917, when the First World War was still raging, Tagore recorded his protest against nationalism which thrives on imperialism in the following words:

“The nation has thrived long upon mutilated humanity. Men, the fairest creation of God, came out of the National manufactory in huge numbers of war-making and money-making puppets, ludicrously vain in their pitiful perfection of mechanism. Human society grew more and more into a marionette show of politicians, soldiers and manufacturers and bureaucrats pulled by wire arrangements of wonderful efficiency.”*

On the present occasion, the involvement in war of imperialist powers assumed deadlier proportions. He read in it a warning of Providence by way of demonstrating what “perils attend the insolence of might”. He felt that he should sound a note of warning to mankind which consequently became the burden of his message. It was translated subsequently into English and published with the title “The Crisis of Civilisation”. In the course of this address, he observed:

“In the meanwhile, the demon of barbarity has given up all pretence and has emerged with unconcealed pangs, ready to tear up humanity in an orgy of devastation. From one end of the world to the other, the poisonous fumes of hatred darken the atmosphere. The spirit of violence which perhaps lay dormant in the psychology of the West has at last roused itself and desecrated the spirit of man.”

Yet, like the true lover of humanity that he was, he could not but end up in an optimistic note. Unless we lose faith altogether

**Nationalism*, Nationalism in the West

in man we cannot but live in faith. Understandably, therefore, Tagore's warning to mankind ends in the following note :

“As I look around, I see the crumbling ruins of proud civilisation strewn like a vast heap of futility. And yet I shall not commit the grievous sin of losing faith in man. I would rather look forward to the opening of a new chapter in his history after the cataclysm is over and the atmosphere rendered clean with the spirit of service and sacrifice.”

Incidentally, this happened to be his last birthday anniversary which he lived to see, for he did not survive it long. Towards the end of July, 1941, he fell so seriously ill that he had to be removed to his Calcutta residence on the 25th of July for treatment. Five days later on the 30th of July, he had to undergo an operation. But he did not recover in spite of the best medical attention and his life ebbed away peacefully in the noon of August 7, 1941.

Calcutta witnessed a scene unprecedented in its annals. People thronged in their thousands to have a last look at their beloved poet when his body was carried to the bank of the Hooghly for cremation. With the evening sun disappeared all trace of his bodily remains in the consuming fire of the funeral pyre.

Thus ended an eventful and glorious life which is as fascinating as his poetry. Tagore represented the quintessence of Indian culture and functioned as the living voice of India. The hand of death, however, could not silence that voice; Tagore dead still continues to function as such through his writings.

APPENDIX A
 GENEALOGICAL TABLES
 CHART I

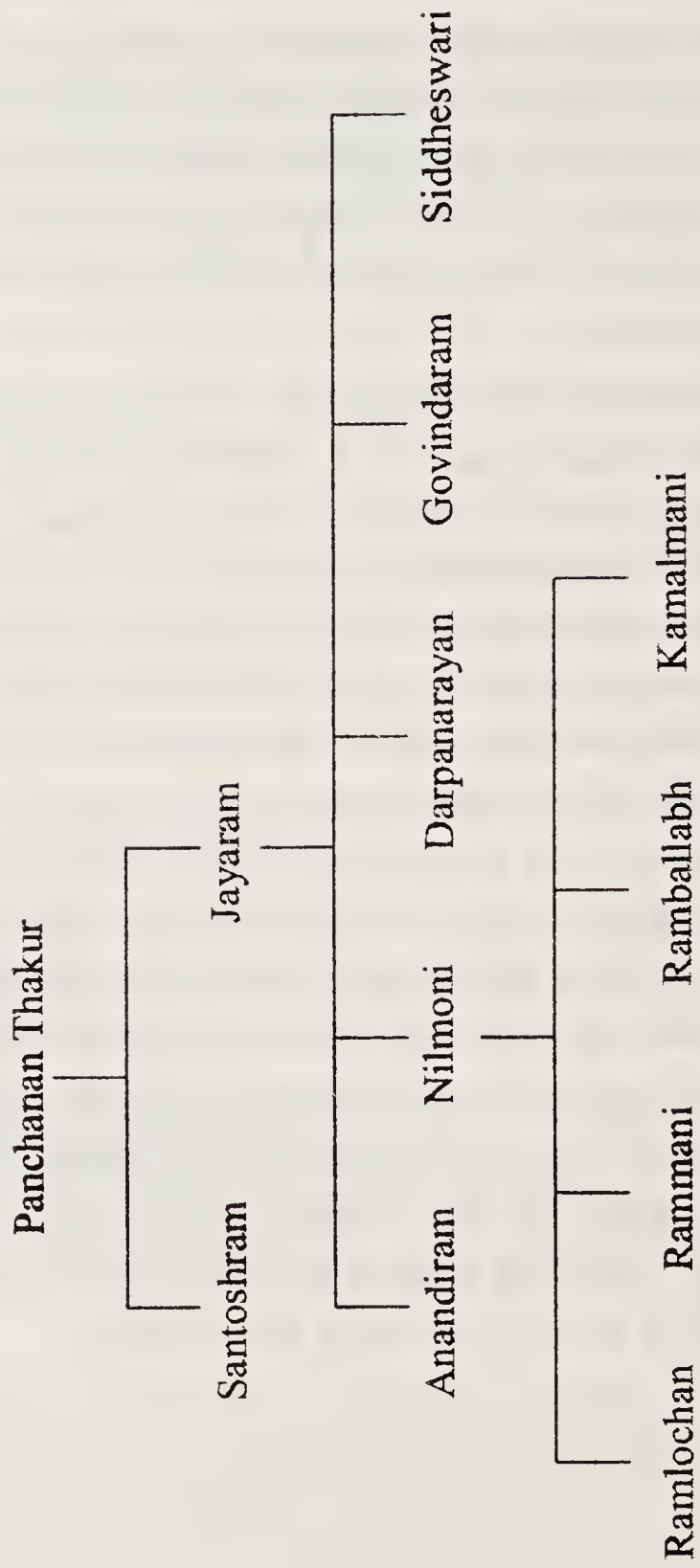


CHART II—A

Ramlochan
m. Menaka Devi

Dwarakanath (adopted son) (1794-1846)
m. Digambari Devi

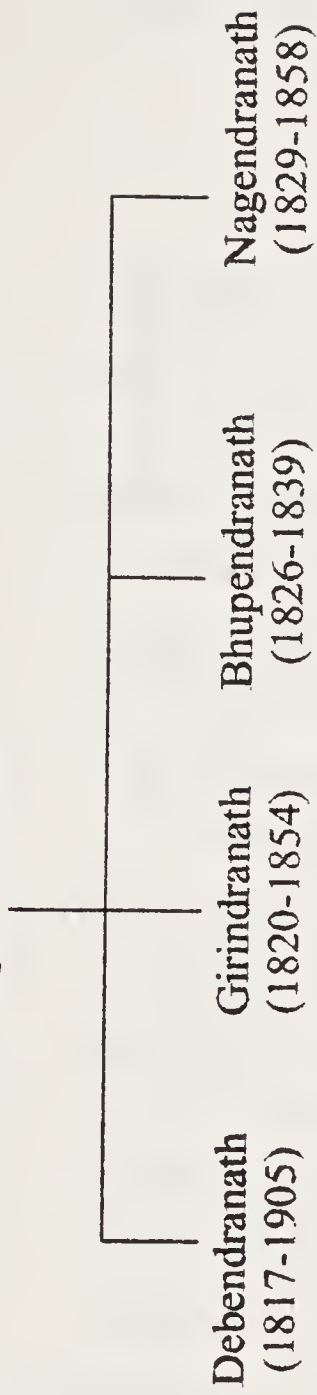


CHART II—B

Rammani (1759-1833)
m. Alaka Devi



CHART III-A

Debendranath (1817-1905)

M. Sarada Devi



Daughter (died in infancy)

Dwijendranath (1840-1926)

m. Sarvasundari Devi

Satyendranath (1842—1923)

m. Jnanadanandini Devi

Hemendranath (1844-1884)

m. Neepamoyce Devi

Birendranath (1844-1915)

m. Prafullamoyee Devi

Saudamini Devi (1847-1920)

m. Saradaprasad Ganguly

Jyotirindranath (1849-1925)

m. Kadambari Devi

Sukumari Devi (1850-1864)

m. Hemendranath Mukherjee

Punyendranath (1851-1887)

Saratkumari Devi (1854-1920)

m. Jadunath Mukherjea

Swarnakumari Devi (1856-1932)

m. Janakinath Ghosal

Barnakumari Devi (1858-1948)

m. Satischandra Mukherjee

Somendranath (1859-1922)

RARINDRANATH (1861-1941)

m. Mrinalini Devi

Budhendranath (1863-1864)

CHART III-B

Girindranath (1820-1854)
m. Jogamaya Devi

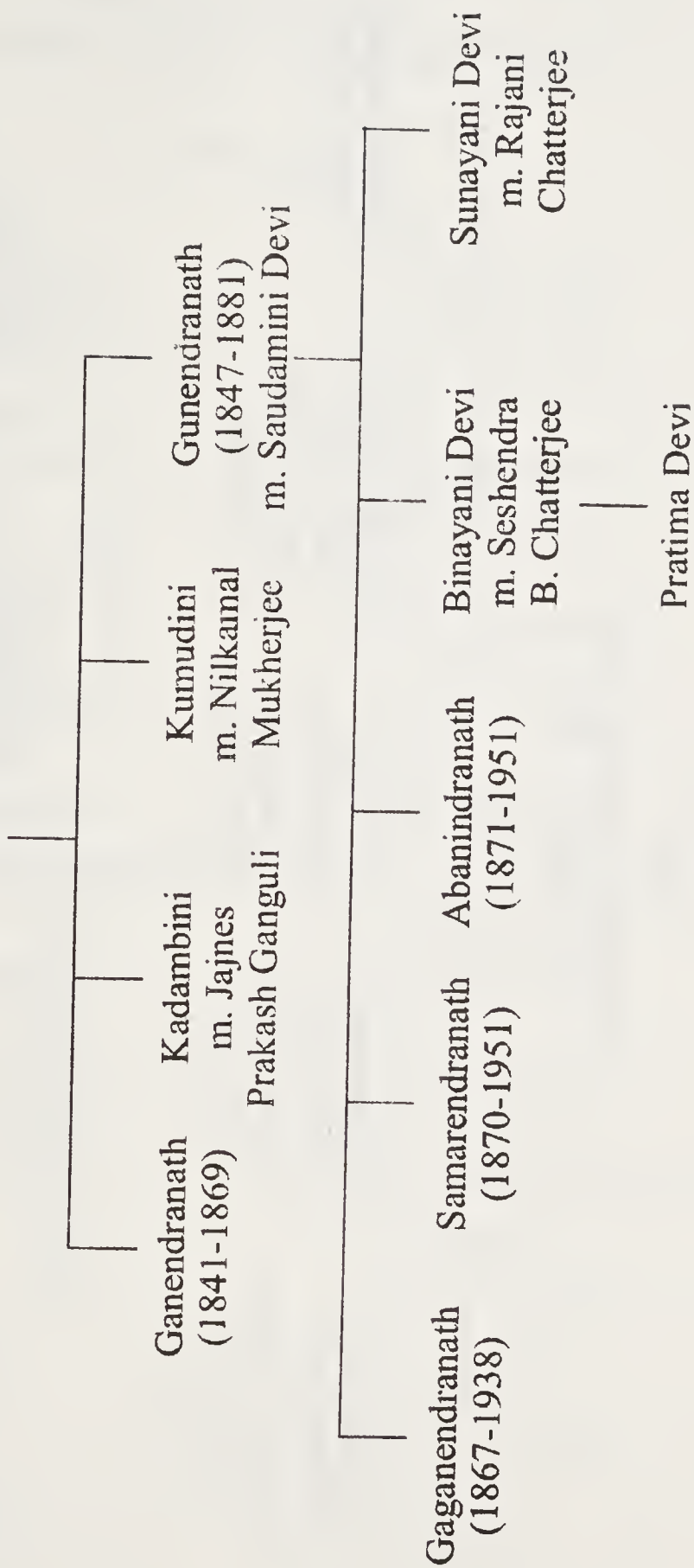
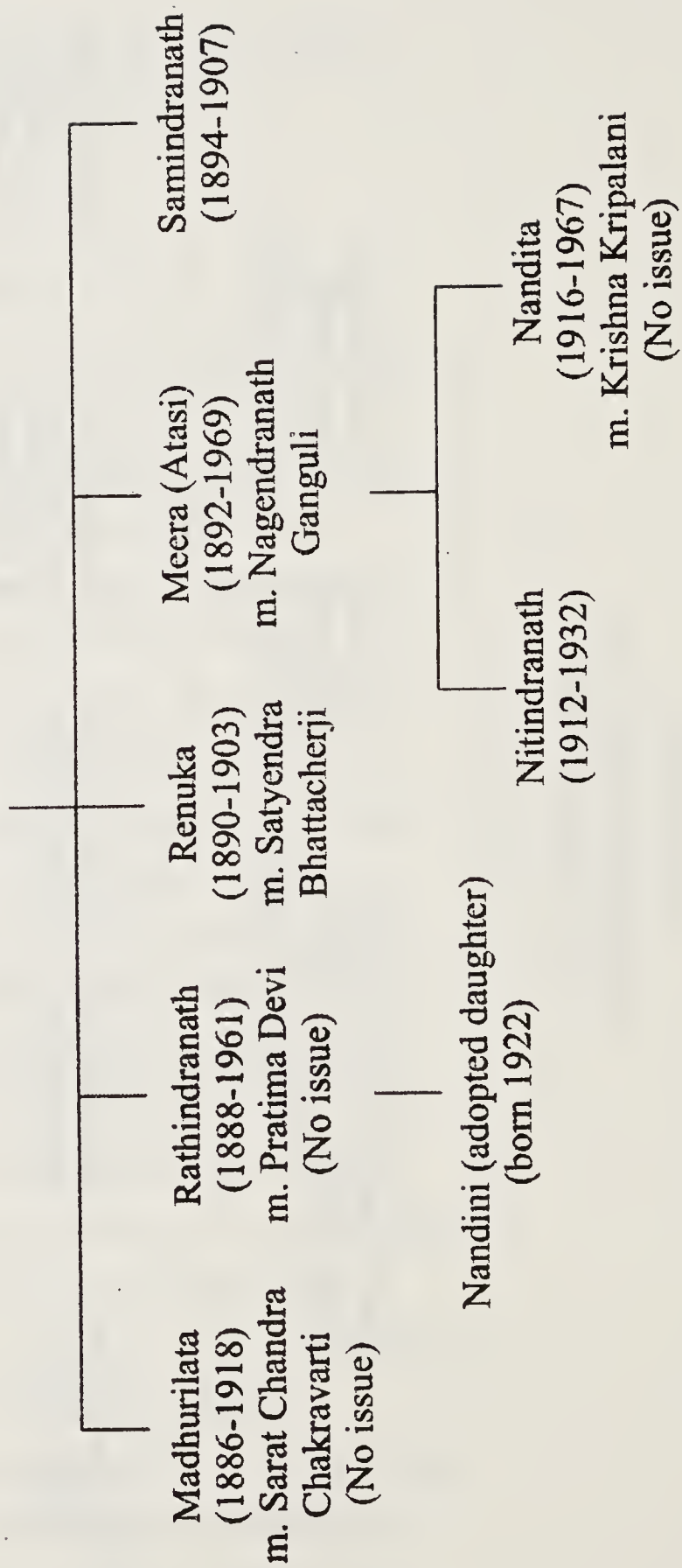


CHART IV

RABINDRANATH (1861-1941)
m. Mrinalini Devi



APPENDIX B

Chronological list of
Rabindranath Tagore's Important Works

I

(in Bengali)

1878	Kabi-Kahini	Poetry
1880	Banaphul	A narrative poem
1881	Valmiki Pratibha	A play in songs
	Bhagna Hridaya	A book of poems
	Rudra Chanda	Playlet
1882	Sandhya Sangeet	A book of poems
	Kalamrigaya	A play in songs
1883	Bau-Thakuranir Hat	A novel
	Prabhat Sangeet	A book of poems
1884	Chhabi O Gan	A book of poems
	Prakritir Pratisodh	A drama in verse
	Nalini	A drama
	Shaishab Sangeet	A book of poems
	Bhanu Singha Thakurer Padavali	Poems composed after the old Vaisnava style
1886	Kari O Komal	A book of poems
1887	Rajarshi	A novel
1888	Mayar Khela	A play in songs
1889	Raja O Rani	A play in verse
1890	Visarjan	A play in verse based on the novel Rajarshi
	Manasi	A book of poems
1892	Chitrangada	A play in verse
	Goray Galad	A comic play
1894	Sonar Tari	A book of poems
	Chhota Galpa	Short stories
	Vichitra Galpa	Short stories
	Katha-Chatustay	Short stories
1895	Galpa-Dashak	Short stories
1896	Nadi	A long poem
	Chitra	A book of poems
1897	Baikunther Khata	A comic play

1899	Kanika	A book of poems
1900	Katha	Narrative poems
	Kahini	Narrative poems and playlets in blank verse
	Kalpana	A book of poems
	Kshanika	A book of poems
1901	Naivedya	A book of poems, mostly sonnets
1903	Chokher Bali	A novel
	Karmaphal	A story
1906	Kheya	A book of poems
	Naukadubi	A novel
1907	Prachin Sahitya	Literacy criticism
	Adhunik Sahitya	Literacy criticism
	Hasya Kautuk	Comic sketches
	Vyanga Kautuk	Comic sketches
1908	Prajapatir Nirbandha	A novel. Subsequently named Chirakumar Sabha. A dramatised version appeared subsequently under the same name.
	Saradotsab	A play
	Mukut	A playlet
1909	Santiniketan (Parts 1 to 8)	Lectures on religion and philosophy
	Shishu	A children's book of verse
1910	Santiniketan (Parts 9 to 11)	Lectures on religion and philosophy
	Gora	A novel
	Gitanjali	Poems and songs
	Raja	A symbolic play
1911	Santiniketan (Parts 12 & 13)	Lectures on religion and philosophy
1912	Dakghar	An allegorical play
	Galpa Chariti	Short stories
	Malini	A play
	Atti Galpa	Short stories

	Chaitali	A book of poems
	Jivan Smriti	Biographical reminiscences
	Achalayatan	A symbolic play
1914	Smaran	A collection of poems on his deceased wife
	Utsarga	A book of poems
	Gitimalya	Songs and poems
	Gitali	Songs and poems
1915	Santiniketan (Part 14)	Lectures on religion and philosophy
1916	Santiniketan (Parts 15 to 17)	Lectures on religion and philosophy
	Phalguni	A play
	Ghare Baire	A novel
	Balaka	Long poems
	Chaturanga	A novel
	Galpa Saptak	Short stories
1918	Guru	Revised version of the play Achalayatan
	Palataka	Narrative poems
1920	Arupratan	A symbolic play. Revised version of Raja
	Payla Nambar	A story
1921	Reensodh	A playlet. Revised version of Saradotsab
1922	Muktadhara	A symbolic play
	Lipika	Prose poems
	Shishu Bholanath	A children's book of verse
1925	Purabi	A book of poems
	Grihaprabesh	A play
	Prabahini	Songs
1926	Chirakumar Sabha	Dramatised version of Prajapatir Nirbandha
	Sodhbodh	A play
	Rakta Karabi	A symbolic play
1927	Ritu Ranga	Drama in songs
1928	Sheshraksha	A comic play. Revised version of Goray Galad

1929	Yogayog	A novel
	Shesher Kavita	A novel
	Tapati	A drama. A prose version of Raja O Rani
	Mahua	A book of poems
1931	Banabani	Songs and poems
	Shapamochan	A playlet in songs
1932	Punascha	Prose poems
1933	Dui Bon	A novel
	Manusher Dharma	Kamala Lectures delivered at the Calcutta University
	Chandalika	A dance drama
	Tasher Desh	A symbolic play
	Banshari	A play
1934	Malancha	A novel
	Char Adhyay	A novel
1935	Shesh Saptak	Prose poems
	Bithika	A book of poems
1936	Chitrangada	A dance drama based on the original drama in verse
	Patraput	Prose poems
	Shyamali	Prose poems
1937	Khapchhara	Nonsense verses
1938	Prantik	A book of poems
	Chandalika	A dance drama
	Senjuti	A book of poems
1939	Prahasini	A book of poems
	Akaspradip	A book of poems
	Shyama	A dance drama
1940	Nabajataka	A book of poems
	Shanai	A book of poems
	Chelebela	Reminiscences of childhood
	Rogshajyay	A book of poems
1941	Arogya	A book of poems
	Janmadine	A book of poems
	Galpasalpa	Poems and stories
	Savyatar Sankat	Last birthday speech

II
(In English)
(including translations by himself)

1912	Gitanjali	Translation from own Bengali poems
1913	The Gardner Crescent Moon Chitra	Translation from own Bengali poems Translation from own Bengali poems Translation from own drama Chitran- gada
1914	Sadhana	Lectures delivered in the United States in 1912-13
1917	Nationalism Personality	Lectures delivered in Japan and the United States in 1916-17 Lectures delivered in Japan and the United States in 1916-17
1919	The Centre of Indian Culture	Lectures in English
1922	Creative Unity	Essays in English
1925	Talks in China	Lectures delivered in China
1928	Fireflies Lectures and Addresses	Translation from own Bengali poems Selections from lectures
1931	The Child The Religion of Man	A symbolic poem in English Hibbert Lectures delivered at Oxford University
1932	Mahatma Gandhi and Depressed Humanity.	An appreciation of Mahatma Gandhi

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Rabindranath Tagore was the first Asian to be awarded with the Nobel prize. As a poet, writer and a philosopher, he became the voice of India's spiritual heritage and a living institution. Though mainly known as a poet, Tagore was multifaceted and left an indelible impression on different branches of art, such as novels, short stories, dramas, articles, essays and paintings. His songs popularly known as *Rabindra Sangeet* have an eternal appeal. He was a social reformer, patriot and above all, a great humanitarian.

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